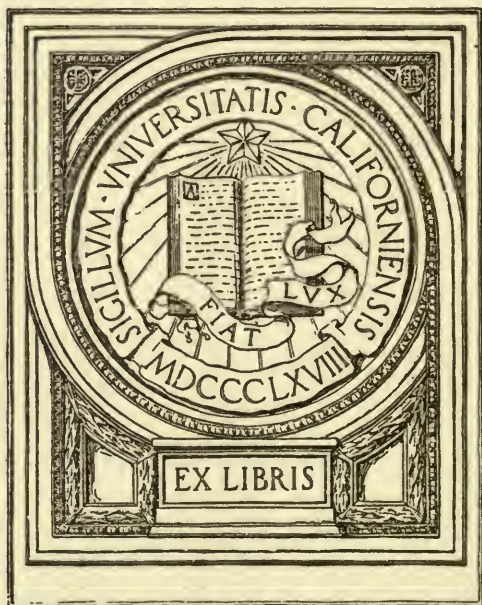


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Four Short Plays

By the same Author
Towards a Theory of Art
Speculative Dialogues
The Epic
Thomas Hardy : A Critical Study

Four Short Plays

By Lascelles Abercrombie

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NOTE

The Adder is reprinted from *Poetry and Drama*; *The Staircase* and *The End of the World* from *New Numbers*.

The Adder was produced by Mr. Basil Dean at the Liverpool Repertory Theatre in 1913, and by Mr. John Drinkwater at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in the same year. *The End of the World* was produced by Miss Muriel Pratt at Bristol in 1914, and by Mr. Drinkwater at Birmingham in 1915. *The Staircase* (with *The End of the World*) was produced by Mr. Jackson Wilcox at the Playhouse, Liverpool, in 1920.

The Adder

Woods in Autumn. A charcoal-burner's Hut at the back ; a little to one side, a round, flat-topped stack of wood, sheathed in turf, a thin blue smoke coming from the flue-opening in the middle. It is early evening, the undergrowth misted. Night falls as the play goes on.

Two charcoal-burners, SETH and NEWBY, the latter a bent old man. They are seated on a log, SETH staring at the stack.

NEWBY. You'll not be needing me to-night, I think?— (SETH seems not to hear him.)

It is main quiet in a copse these days ;
Fall's here and no mistake : do you snuff the mould ?
A queer good smell 'tis, when the mould is making,
And the mist comes bitter with it out of the ground,
Good as the brownest beer was ever brewed.
Nay, not to you, though,—you, a Methody man
And sworn off beer and tobacco. Do you get

The Adder

The worth of them, I wonder, in your chapel ?
That Mister Startup, that flash parson of yourn,
Can daze your wits with preaching, and they say
You can deal prayers that smack upon your tongue :
But 't isn't the same as a black pipe and a good tap.
Why don't you talk ? You seem all in a mood.
You'll not be wanting me to-night, Seth ?

SETH (*rousing himself*). No.

A sod or two is all the stack will need ;
She's burning gently. But stay here awhile.—
Squire's come home, they say ?

NEWBY. Ay : I suppose
He'd liever die at home.

SETH. As bad as that ?

NEWBY. If a man like Squire rummages London
town

For wickedness, all the wild spunk in him
Driving him on full hurl, chasing his lust
Mad as a trooper swording in a charge,—
He's bound to shatter. Flesh ain't made for that.
Met him myself to-day. You never saw
A brow with such a fiendish writing on it.
“Hallo, Mud,” says he ; “Newby, sir,” says I ;

The Adder

“What does it feel like to be earth,” says he,
“Damn you!”—I don’t see why he damned me?
Lord!

The brow of the man! When he’s in hell, he’ll
curse

The brindled devil himself for a tame lamb.

SETH. I know, Newby, what’s in him. Once, my
brow

Was sealed like his. How did he look beside?

NEWBY. Oh, his face as hard as a carving;
though, as he talkt,

He foisted on his mouth a kind of twitching,
A kind of smile, that couldn’t help but sneer.
But truly I lookt at naught but his hurt brow.

SETH. Hurt! Yes, ’tis hurt indeed.

NEWBY.

It made me think

Of a hound I once saw, that was inwardly scorcht
With swallowed poison, and wrencht hard,—that
brow

With lines like two big weals running straight up
Pucker’d on either side;—how comes a man
So signed? Deuce! I should think his forehead
aches!

The Adder

You know how a green leaf put upon the fire
Twists and bends backwards, till you'd think the heat
Tortured it ? Well, somehow his brow's like that.
And he scarce gone thirty !

SETH. But he has laboured !
He has wickedly mown the harvest of his life ;
Now it's all stubble, and it stabs his feet.
But stubble must be burnt !

NEWBY. Ay, gi'e us a prayer !
One of your clockwork rants.

SETH. (*Taking no notice.*) I read the man.
His lusts follow him like tame dogs, diseased
And full of weeping sores ; and let him rest
A moment, all the loving pack yelps up,
One or another leaps upon his knee,
Vile mange and all, and nestles at his heart.
Oh, yes, I know. He's tried to gorge his sin
And yet he cannot dull himself ; his brain
Is bitterly tired of being always sin,
But still he must be imagining new evil ;
And it all turns to the same small filthy tricks,
The same foul dabbling that he sickens at.
I know it all ; my God, don't I know it !

The Adder

NEWBY. A queasy hunger, eh? See now, you were

A pretty lot yourself, until you turned
Methody; why don't you try your prayers on
Squire?

SETH. Hold your noise, old fool.

NEWBY. Well, I'll be crawling.

SETH. No. Stay a bit. I want to ask you . . .

NEWBY. What?

SETH. O, has he had his milk? (*Pointing to the
hut.*)

NEWBY. The adder? Why, you gave it him
yourself.

'Tis an uneasy worm to-night. He lifts
His neck straight up, and keeps his tongue aquiver;
He looks for something. Worms should be sleepy
now.

Why does he wake?

SETH. Pah! What should he look for?

You old men think an adder is a spirit.

NEWBY. We know the woods and understand
their folk.

We aren't dazed with grammar. Schools and books

The Adder

May grind the trade in a man to a Sheffield knife ;
But put a scholar in the woods ; he'll make
No more of them than a dog would make of a book.

(*Seizing SETH's arm.*)

Listen to the air, Seth ; look around. You fool !
Will you be wiser than these, my Methody ?
Will you be telling me man's master here ?
But I'll tell you ; this half-light, the fall's quiet,
The harmless timber,—they all bide their time :
They are all sworn together, and against us.
Keep still a minute now, and catch your breath,
And let the hour have you. Can you not feel
The woods crouch like a beast behind your back ?
And now look round. Where's the beast gone that
croucht ?

But we're in the midst of something biding its time.
Don't you know men who fear the woods at night
Worse than a ghost ? But was there ever one
Who kept an adder in his hut, the trees
Could have the soul of ? Put your heel on the worm,
And in a year the trees will drink you up,
Take the man out of you, as a beech drains
And spoils the earth he stands in.

The Adder

SETH.

Heathen talk.

There's a belief can bless the prowling night,
Send off afraid the old terrors that come
To craze the soul with leering through its windows.
I have the faith. I am secure.

NEWBY.

Now, Seth,

See here. You are the man for Mister Startup,
Your brummagem parson, and the Methody lot ;
None like you at a prayer. What would they say,
Your ranters, if they heard you kept a snake,
An aged heathen adder, in your hut,
And there's no burner in the country puts
Such faith in the worm.

SETH.

Not I : it's naught to me.

NEWBY. Good ; then I'm going to kill him. (*He makes for the hut.*)

SETH (*springs up and holds him back*). Stop, you fool !

NEWBY. Ay, so it's naught to you ? You might have known

I wouldn't kill him.

SETH.

Newby, you'll keep it hid ?

The Adder

NEWBY. Why, the man's twittering. No, your chapel-folks
Shall have no word from me. What do they know?
What can their silly-fangled hymns and prayers
And Startup's teaching tell them of the woods
And the old things our trade comes up against?

SETH. O I'm not one of your pagan-witted
burners.

There is a special bond for me.

NEWBY. Ay, so?
Well, let me keep my way. I don't shudder
As if the worm were sliding down my neck
When there's a mention of it.

SETH. Newby, 'tis said,
In foreign lands (it is a horrible thing)
Women in sleep have suckled snakes—they've been
Roused by cold, venomous lips drawing their milk.
It's worse with me. For I am nourishing him,
That viper shut up in the box in yonder,
I'm nourishing him, Newby, with my mind.

NEWBY (*laughing*). And you the man for a prayer
above them all!

The Adder

Hark !

SETH. What did you hear ?

NEWBY. The footing of a man

In the long riding.

SETH. Who'd be rambling now ?

NEWBY. Squire, maybe, roaming the fever off him.

Sounds reach a long way in this quiet air.

But it is time I went, or I'll be missing

The best of the evening at the " Hark to Melody."

SETH. No, no, don't make me go.

NEWBY. What is it then ?

SETH (*hastily*). My girl's come back to me.

NEWBY. Well, what of that ?

SETH. 'Twas yesterday she came. My sister's
dead,

She'd nowhere else to live. What shall I do,

Newby, what shall I do ?

NEWBY. What are you gabbling ?

You're a queer father.

SETH. Newby, but it's the Squire !

NEWBY. Frightened of him, are you ? Well
then, warn her.

The Adder

SETH (*starting*). Warn her? No; warning wouldn't do.

NEWBY. Why not?

SETH. I dreamt my sister came out of her death
To me last night, and awfully she spoke :
“ Seth, the girl's in your keeping now ! ”

NEWBY. Why not?

Who else should keep her? What's your fear in
the girl?

SETH. I'll tell you : 'tis myself I fear in her.

NEWBY. I don't take that.

SETH. Why, in my wickedness
Was her beginning : out of my rebellion
She came !

NEWBY. I suppose she had a mother, though.

SETH. We'll leave her out of this. If there is sin
Sown in the girl, it is all mine ; there was
Enough flourishing in my blood to choke
With tares and weeds the innocence of the heart
I forced to live.

NEWBY. Ay, and it is the truth
'Tis hard to make clean earth of twitch-grown
soil.

The Adder

SETH. And then to love the girl so much. Do
you think

It can be right to love—one of such birth
So fiercely—O, so terribly to love her ?
If lovers have a child, be they right or wrong
In loving, they must give the bairn their hearts.
But mine came into flesh so wickedly
She is a sin ! My sin she is ! My hate
Of the Lord God, my scorning of His laws,
My mere joy in delighting all my lust !

NEWBY. A child's a child, I think.

SETH. You know nothing.

I was all made of sin when she was born.
But out of the villainous hubbub of my life
The good hands of my sister stole my baby ;
Took her away and kept her hid from me,
And I went on in wickedness. My Lord,
I did not want to sin.

I would be sickening at the beastliness
I'd forced my helpless spirit to devour ;
And right into my ailing grief would blaze
Lust like a golden trumpet ; and like singing

The Adder

My blood would leap into its joy again ;
And I was drabbing again.

NEWBY (*not hiding his disgust*). And it went on
Till the blood was tired in you ?

SETH. It may be.—No,
God forgive you ! Heaven remembered me !

NEWBY. The two things happen together, very
often.

SETH. The Lord sent down a burning blight
upon

My mastery of sin, and like a flame
Undid the briars that were round my ankles,
Crippled the spiny fingers that had hold,
With hookèd thorns driven into my heart,
Upon my life, the wild thickets of sin :
He took me out of the devil's wood, and I
Have never left to serve Him.

NEWBY. And, O Glory,
Startup's right-hand man ever since, Amen !

SETH. Yes, I was saved. But then there was
this soul

Mortally wearing flesh and blood of mine,
My girl, my little daughter,—my flesh, Newby !

The Adder

Ay, and there are those sins of mine ! You know
When the mercy of God whips off the hunt
That is so greedy after a man, they still,
His pack of sins, roam somewhere, empty and
hungry.—

My sins are lurking for the flesh they tasted
And liked so well, the flesh that is my daughter.

NEWBY. Then you'd do well to warn her ears
against

Their barking, if it's dogs they are, your sins.

SETH. We did better than that.—Dogs ? Nought
so fierce,

But something sly and quiet and creeping close
Upon the earth and waiting for to sting ;
Yet they can only live in that dark wood
Where the fiend has his cave, and all the things
That are unholy crouch away from God :
You must go walking in the wicked ground
Before the poison of sin can strike at you.

(NEWBY *shrugs at him.*)

SETH. When I turned back from wickedness, I
and my sister

Were of one mind. This little lass of mine

The Adder

Should never know, till she were grown and safe,
Where evil lies ; for sure must it not be
She could not stray there, if she'd heard nought
of it ?

Not knowing evil, could she find it out ?—
That fearful pride in disobeying God
At least would have no words to madden her !—
My sister reared her, gave her all her schooling ;
Her lonely house and the empty moor behind,
No more world than that should the girl have.
We did it to a marvel. 'Twas a risk,
I know ; and I do fear it anger'd God.
For see where we are now. God toucht the sleep
Of my good sister, and made it be her death,
And to the clumsy keeping of my hands
Is put this girl, who knows nothing of evil,
Nothing of sins and wiles and temptations !

NEWBY. It's a wonderful sort of girl she is, my
word !

What, never heard of Old Horns ? You must have
been,

You and your sister, wonderly afeared.

What, you a proper sweating Methody man,

The Adder

And let a girl get past you all untaught
That a holy nose should sniff hell everywhere ?
You with the lungs to bawl the sinners down
Upon their knees, and fetch up out of their bellies
“ I am a worm, I am a worm, Amen,”
As well as Startup can himself ! Why, this
Will stick in my throat like a swallowed stickle-
back ;—

’Tis all as good as the adder ! What with him
And with your daughter, you’re a rare Methody !

SETH (*jumping up*). Curse you, jibing fool ! Put
her again

In the same speech as—as the thing in there,
And I’ll deal what your wicked head deserves !

(*He suddenly stops threatening, sits down, and
puts his face in his hands.*)

NEWBY. Why, what the devil can there be
between

The adder and your daughter ?

SETH (*imploring him*). Don’t say it, man !
O, don’t put them together ! Ah, Lord, stop him !
(*A short pause. SETH seems to be praying.*)

NEWBY gazes at him astonished.)

The Adder

NEWBY. I'll be bound, this is a strange affair.
So you've not seen your daughter till just now ?

SETH. I've seen her ; but she never lookt on me.
Yesterday was the first time that I've kist her ;
I doubt whether I should have kist her, too.

NEWBY. You're a queer father.

SETH. What else could I do but hide ?
I was afraid there might be in my face .
Something of evil left ; and then the way
I'd look on her would make her wonder at me.—
How could I look on her and hold away
From thinking on the blood that's in her heart,
And all there is of me sleeping in her ?
But I must see her, or the years would drown me.
There was a little orchard near the house,
With a high wall around ; but there a place
Where I could hide and watch the girl's young play
Among the grasses, and her dancing round
The lime-washt apple trees. And I was a man
With poison in his brain, to see her go
So joyously and be so glad with skipping !
When the lent-lilies had begun their gold
In the green sod, the little maid would prink

The Adder

Before them with a lady's courtesies,
Then, petticoats held up, she'd whirl
Madly delighted childish reels.
How could I tell, whether her wanton games,
Her merry tiptoe gait, were not in truth
Vile words prettily spoken ?
And now, Newby, is it not perilous ?

(He looks restlessly towards the hut.)

You'd best be going among the drinkers now.

NEWBY. Well, I don't envy you your job with
her.

But if you'll hear me, tell the lass her feet
Are in the world as on a tight-rope slung
Over the gape and hunger of Hell. At least
That's what you told your chapel-fellows once ;
How they'd grin to hear of your girl's schooling !

*(He goes off chuckling. It is dusk. SETH goes
into the hut and brings out a box, and pores
over it, kneeling.)*

SETH. They are old wives' tales !
Is it a worship I am making of you,
My adder ? Worshipping the evil thing ?

The Adder

Ay, but what has a beast to do with evil ?
They say a snake goes footless from a curse,
And all this crooked zed upon his back
Is a curse written, could we spell it out,
And 'tis the fiend's own spittle in his mouth.
Wives' tales ! And yet the man who laughs at them
May be more fooled than he for whom they're truth :
We can't tell what is going on at all.
I have known dawns when the earth, the trees and
 grasses,
Seem as they'd drifted here out of strange travel,
And all the creatures like the crew of a ship
Late from seeing marvels, and daring not
To speak of them. What's to be made of that ?
And what does my heart make of you, my adder ?
Worship !—why not ?
Why not worship the evil in this beast
Since, while it has its evil, I am pure ?—
That evening, when I knelt in agony
Here, and the Lord relieved me of my sins,
I was like one has suddenly slipt a burden ;
And childishly, amazedly, I lookt
To find that bulk of sin : and there, in the box,

The Adder

Coiled and sleeping, the adder ! Then I knew
What God had done for me !
My sins, that could not be destroyed, had past
Into the adder : I was pure as the sun :
There all my evil lay, hid in the adder !
Ay, creeping danger, were you curst before
Or not, is nothing to me : but now I can
Exult over you, greatly exult ! For now
Iniquity you are, iniquity,
And my iniquity !
God has anointed with my wrong your head ;
And it is mine, this jagged blasphemy
Scribbled along your back : my sins that weigh
Your body flat, my malice in your eyes ;
That flickering tongue has spoken in my heart :
O, do you hiss ? Ay, that's my hate of God
Shifted on you, fastened into your mind.
And I do right to worship you, my sins,—
Nay, my salvation ! And not I alone,
Adder, am safe by what I see in you !
For while God keeps my sins close shut and bound
In this cold thing, how can they visit her,
My daughter ?—

The Adder

(It is almost dark. SETH is croucht brooding over the box. Without seeing him, NEWBY and a girl come in.)

THE GIRL. O, but there's no one here.

NEWBY. Hullo, where's he gone ?
He won't be long away. Come, sit you down.

GIRL. I've not been out of doors in the dark before.

What are they doing, all these things ? Asleep ?
I think they're wide awake, for all their quiet,
Waiting for us to leave them. What will they do,
I wonder, when they have the woods to themselves ?

NEWBY. Aren't you the lass that's never heard of the devil ?

(SETH suddenly and angrily leaps up before them.)

SETH. Leave her alone, you old limb of the fiend !
Be off, or by the living God, I'll kill you,
Old wickedness !

(NEWBY slinks off from his rage.)

(To the girl.) What are you doing here ?

GIRL. But is there any harm in coming out ?
Let me stay with you, father !

The Adder

SETH (*grim*). Yes, my girl,
You'll have to stay here now, like it or not.
Under my eyes you're safe.

GIRL. Why, how you quiver !
Tell me, is he a wicked man, that fellow ?

SETH. Ay, one of Satan's own. What do you
mean
By coming here ?

GIRL. I was tired of the house ;
And there were thoughts plaguing me like midges.
O, I wish I'd known that was a wicked old man !

SETH (*in fear*). What ? What's behind this ?

GIRL. I might have had
Something from him I want. I suppose, father,
You aren't a wicked man ?

SETH (*roughly taking her arm*). Give me your
meaning,
And no more foolery.

GIRL. Why, but that's it !
I don't know even what my meaning is.
Have you seen flowers grown in a cellar ?

SETH. Well ?

The Adder

GIRL. How can they know there is a sun outside ?
Yet the pale leaves they have, show they can tell
They're cheated out of something. So am I !
I'm cheated. There's a brave colour growing some-
where,

And I know naught of it, but that my life
Has been shut off from it, somehow. Father, sins
Are scarlet, are they not ?

SETH (*scared*). Sins ? What do you know
Of sins ?

GIRL. Why, there again ! I know nothing.
I'm like those cellar plants, fooled and cheated.

SETH. Satan has had your ear, girl.

GIRL (*simply*). No, father ;
No one has told me this ; I just feel it.
What is this evil, then ?

SETH. Darling, don't ask !

GIRL. Do you not know it either ? Listen, then.
Once to our door, on a cold and drenching day,
A halt old tramping beggar-woman came,
Her lean form lapt in a shabby duffel cloak
Tattered with going through the weather, stained
With dirt and wear. But when she turned away

The Adder

I saw that, on the back of her poor cloak,
Was a great patch of scarlet cloth sticht on ;
And as she limped off through the rain, indeed
That old grey cloak had something fine about it,
She'd have some pride in wearing it ! And then,
I overheard my aunt once muttering
“ Our sins are scarlet ! ”

Scarlet !

That was a wonderful thing for me to hear !
And all at once I seemed to be wearing life
Like a beggarly cheap cloak : and some know how
To clout their drab stuff with a gaudypatch !

Scarlet !

Why, scarlet is for fire ; and look how mild
The green and blue and common brown of earth
Seem when the day ends in a scarlet light !

Scarlet ! I think it is a kind of power.

And blood is scarlet !—Do you know what I did ?
I took a thorn and scored my arm, and watcht
The blood come beading, loving the colour of it.
But then I cried ; for what's the good of blood
So shining scarlet, if life takes nothing from it,
But I had heard my aunt speak of a thing

The Adder

That can in life be scarlet ; and it must be
A thing of power and pride. Why don't I know it ?

SETH. O God, is this Thy punishment at last ?

*(He looks round wearily. Then whispering
fiercely)*

Into the hut !

Quick, into it, and stay hid ! Do you hear me, girl ?

(Seizing a stick and threatening her.)

Enough trifling ! In there, till I let you out.

*(The girl yields frightened ; he pushes her in,
and she is not seen. It is quite dark. A
pause. Then the SQUIRE saunters in.)*

SQUIRE. Who's this chap ? Burning charcoal,
by the smoke.

Is it anyone I know ? *(Peering close at SETH.)*

Yes : and your name is somewhere in my mind.

SETH. 'Tis Seth, sir.

SQUIRE. I have you ! Seth ! The shame of the
parish, Seth !

Ah, but you've lapsed since then. Indeed, I know

It is not everyone can keep it up :

I'll not reproach you. I suppose you are

The Adder

Still the reformed lecher ? And do you still
Strictly ride your flesh with a martingale ?

SETH (*giggling*). Good even, sir.

Yes, thank you, sir, I'm doing pretty well.

SQUIRE. Let's talk a little : for what you were
you are,

However sadly changed, and so we're equals :

Lechery is the one thing makes men equal.

So come, man to man, lecher to lecher,

Let us be honest—no one can overhear—

Let's have it out. Is it worth it, Seth ?

Ay, there's the point for both of us. For me,

Is it worth while keeping hard at the game ?

And then, for you, quite on the contrary,

Is it worth while to switch yourself from one

Simply to fiddle in another game ?

SETH. A game ? Ha, ha ! That's good, sir !

Yes, a game !

SQUIRE. Yes, but I reckon you're no happier

In your new game than I am in my old.

So here's the point : is your religion worth

To you more than my lechery's worth to me ?

I'll tell you what I think, Seth.

The Adder

They're both worth mighty little, mighty little :
They've both the worth of diseases,—no, they're
both

A living man's misery about death.—

Well, we can't help ourselves. To every man

His own game ; a man's pleasure is his fate.

But I shan't follow you : for in your style

There's this offends me. If there's a thing I hate

It is these travelling menageries :

To see a couple of rusty string-halt geldings

Tugging a square-walled cover'd truck through mud,

And to know that, cramped within that clumsy
waggon,

Lumbering, jolting, unlit, airless,—lie

Lions, Sahara lions !—And in you

Once there were lions, Seth, the lions of sin ;

Mangy, perhaps, but still—lionish voices.

And now you've shut your sins up in a box—

SETH (*startled*). A box ?

SQUIRE. Yes, in a dirty travelling cage ;

You sit on the shafts, and a miserable gelding

You call religion, draws you through the world ;

A creaking, groaning pace ! And after you

The Adder

You drag, lockt in a cruel narrow den
Those sins had such a free life in you once.
Seth, I could never do that !—Something there was
The keeper told me about you. Was it poaching ?
No, no ;
The jackals are all penned up with the lions.
What was it now ? I laughed at it. Ah, yes.
They say you've got your daughter back.

SETH. Who ? I ?

I have no daughter, sir.

SQUIRE. What, is she dead ?

SETH. I mean she does not live with me, you
know.

My sister keeps her ; a strong-minded woman,
Won't let me see the girl.

SQUIRE. Surely I heard

Your sister *is* dead.

SETH. O no ! There's a mistake !

I saw her Tuesday last—O quite alive.

SQUIRE (*yawning*). So am I, God be curst.—Seth,
I can feel

Your eyes glooming upon me through the darkness.
What, you, the leaky pipkin that has lost,

The Adder

Through flaws, the burning liquor trusted to you,
You will be pitying me, a vessel sound
And perfect, that has never lost a drop
Of the bright wrathful wine I am charged to carry ?
What's this thin vinegar that is in you now,
The cracks of you caulked with charitable clay,
That makes you dare be proud above me,—me
Brimmed with the ancient vintage I have kept
Faithfully mellowing, till I am soaked through
With the power of it, with the scarlet fire of it ?

(The girl comes out of the hut.)

A girl ! A young girl !—

My Satan, you begin to weary me.

The skill's too noticeable ; you would catch me
Easier, if you fumbled a few tricks.—

—Well, who are you this time ?

GIRL.

I am his daughter.

SQUIRE. Aha ! Let's have a look at you.

(He strikes a match and studies her face.)

Seth, Seth,

Would you have kept this from me ? She's the sort
One dreams of. But it always comes to this :
Religion takes all comradeship from a man.

The Adder

His daughter, are you ? Then I hope you are
The daughter of his wickedness ;—that should make
you

Full of sin as a hive is full of honey.

GIRL. I cannot say, sir ; for I don't know at all
What sin may be. But I know well there is
Something sealed up within me,—in my heart,
I think ; and it is troubling for its freedom.

SQUIRE. Very likely ; and I should say will still
Go on kicking and bothering in your heart
Unless you help it out. Then, you will find,
The grub will hatch into that notable fly—
Naughtiness !

GIRL. You speak kindly ; will you not help me ?
If you saw the Morecambe tide chase a lame man,
You on a horse, would you not give him help ?
I am a kind of cripple ; and I loathe
The plight I'm in. Lift me out of it !
Do let me coax you. Tell me about sin !—
For I will get to know.

SQUIRE. Are you a fool,
Or making a fool of me ?

GIRL. It's I've been fooled.

The Adder

SQUIRE. Seth, you don't seem to be amused at this.

GIRL. I heard you say the word ; scarlet, you said ;

There is something in you that you feel like scarlet. Is that not sin ? So tell me what sin is.

SQUIRE. No, no, no, no ! Satan, it will not do. The show runs far too smoothly,—far too like What my desires expect. Somehow, at last Mere skill becomes disgusting. Even a cook Who gives me always everything I want Turns out an odious person. So, my dear, You come so apt, just as my hunger woke, And are so thoroughly spiced with what I want, That I—will bid you a good night.

GIRL. O, sir,
You will not learn me this ?

SQUIRE. Why, no, not now ;
But I dare say the mood will change : we'll try
Some day, if we can find out what sin is.

(He looks at her a moment, and then goes abruptly.)

The Adder

GIRL (*dancing round the stack*) :

O life of mine, I shall love you yet :
We shall be changed, my life and I.
Dancing will no more be a game
Played to pretend we're hearing a tune.
There will be singing of tunes enough,
To make us dance when we know it not :
They'll be living within us, the tunes,
Water of brooks in spring for happiness,
Scarlet fire for power and pride.

SETH (*seizing her by the arm as she passes him*) :

Do you see that stack ?

GIRL (*breathless*). It's only a pile of wood.

SETH. Ay, in the dark, that's what it seems ; but
listen !

Within it there's a heart, a smouldering heart,—
Fire is smothered there.

GIRL. And smothered in me.

SETH. And I'll keep it so ! For look, if I
Broke through the sheathing turf and thatch of
boughs,
And left it open, the hidden fire would come
Fiercely darting out on us, turning the whole

The Adder

Stack, and the whole of the woods, to bellowing
flame,

No one could quench.

GIRL (*breaking away*). And I shall be alive,
Alive in the manner of scarlet and golden flame.

SETH (*gripping her again*) :

Listen,—my father, climbing on a stack
Like this one, to be tending it, trod through
The turf and branches, and the fire caught him
And charred him to the knees. Girl, there are hearts,
Unsafe as heaps of dried wood, and within
Mined by eating fires. And I, your father,
Worse than my father fared ; for into the hot
Heart of my heart I broke, and I was caught,
The whole of me, in the blazing rage of hell.
And as my heart is, so is yours ; a thing
To choke and stifle ; or, once set it free,
The flaming of your heart will seize you and
Everlastingly burn you.

GIRL. This is talk
I can make nothing of. Who would refuse
A splendid thing ? I know there is a power
Can make my life seem as if it were scarlet.

The Adder

And it is like to fire, you say. Why, then,
That is the splendour I have dreamt about ;
What should I do refusing it ? What gain
Choking it down, but the old dull want I have ?

SETH. Watch now, while I kick a hole in the
stack.

Do you mark the glowing danger, the red lust
Biding within ? See, all the dark's ashamed
That such hot mischief lights it up. A sod
Plugs the hole now ; but had I left it open,
The stack were gone in a ravage of wild flame.
You've lookt into your heart now : are you not feared ?

GIRL. I say, I can make nothing of this. My
heart ?

Is my heart stored with such a glowing light ?
And I must be afraid of it ? I will not !
But if this power is in me, it shall burn
To freedom, yes, and fill me with the burning.

SETH. O girl of mine, if you knew how I loved
you !

Promise me now, you won't go near the Squire.

GIRL. Why not ?

SETH. Darling, believe me ! O, he would

The Adder

Treat you fiendishly,—God, and laugh to do it !

GIRL. Father, let's have this out. What right have you

To cheat me of a knowledge all folks have ?

Is it for sin that my heart so desires ?

SETH. It cannot be that ; no, it cannot be that.

GIRL. So then what harm in finding what sin is ?

SETH. Yes, it is sin you want ! But stifle it.

GIRL. And why ? ' And why ? You cannot show me that.

I tell you I mean to find this out !

SETH (*letting her go and standing bemused*) :

What do I, fighting with the evil heart

She has from me ? If God has any mercy

He'll fight it down in her now, once and for ever.—

You'd know what sin is ? Well, I can tell you.

GIRL. You can, father ?

SETH. The very spirit of sin

I can show you ; for I have it with me.

Show it you ? You can handle it, play with it.

GIRL. Where have you got it ?

SETH. Here, in the midst of us.

The Adder

GIRL. 'Tis something I can touch ?

SETH. Come you and try.

Bend down. Do you see ?—It is in here I keep it.

Undo the sneck of the lid, put in your hands,

And grope, search it thoroughly.

GIRL. In this box ?

SETH (*over her*). Lord, I perceive you will not let
my sins

Go past her. There is no escape for her

But through my torments ; but, O God, my sins

Will come too strong upon her ; and already

Her blind heart fills with longing for my evil.

Give her the whole of it now, O Lord my God !

Satisfy all her longing at once ; and let

The evil which her hands discover, Lord,

Be death !

GIRL. Ah, it is wet,—no, but how cold !

(*She cries out.*)

O, I am bitten, father. There is some anger

Hid in your box. And it has bitten me.

SETH. Show me. Let's have some light.

(*He makes a small hole in the stack. The red
glare again leaps out.*)

The Adder

Ay, on the wrist.

Both fangs right on a vein. They must have sunk
Up to the gums in her flesh.

GIRL. Shall I suck the bite ?

SETH (*seizing her arm*). No need : sit down by
me, and keep you quiet.

How does your arm feel ?

GIRL. Strangely : very numb

And as if 'twere swoln.

SETH. Cold ?

GIRL. Icy : is it all right ?

SETH. All right, darling.

GIRL (*struggling a little*). Why must you hold my
arm ?

SETH. 'Tis better so. Bide you still awhile.—
Very soon it will be in the heart of her.

(*He plugs up the hole in the stack.*)

(*Darkness.*)

CURTAIN.

The Staircase

A small room in an empty cottage, without furniture.

Stone floor ; dirty ragged paper on walls. The room is littered with bits of sawn wood, shavings, tools ; a joiner's frail lies on the floor. Door to the open air on right ; in the back wall an old kitchen range, with a good fire burning. A young joiner is alone in the room ; he has been putting in a new staircase, which is all but finished ; the new wood, clean and white, shows up amid the dingy room.

The JOINER (looking at his work : in a sort of chant)

Hammer and nails, gimlet and screws,
Bradawl, chisel, mallet and plane,
A will to work, and health in my thews,
And season'd wood of a good clean grain
Shaping under my hands and skill,
And obeying my master-will . . .

(Speaking)

The Staircase

And I alone : that's the best of it here.—
These book-read folks won't beat that song of mine,
I warrant. I'll have a right tune for it some day :
 Hammer and nails, gimlet and screws,
 Bradawl, chisel, mallet and plane,
 A will to work . . .

(The outer door is pushed open, and a woman comes in, tired and worn, wet through, with a long shabby cloak on her. She stands a moment gazing round the room.)

WOMAN. Alone ?
Was it you buzzing to yourself I heard ?
Grumbling for company ?

(The young man stares at her and answers mechanically.)

JOINER. For company ? I'd liever keep to myself.

WOMAN. Dreaming aloud, then ?— Ay, cleverest thing
To do against the world, for sure, is dreaming.
But it needs shelter.— Well, go on dreaming.

The Staircase

I'll borrow your warmth awhile ; the drench of the
rain

Is dribbling down my skin inside my clothes

Cold as worms.

(She sits by the fire, opens her cloak, and shows she is holding a baby. She begins to suckle it.)

JOINER. You've got a baby !

WOMAN. Well done, young man !

You know a thing or two : a baby it is.—

Finish your job, and I'll keep on at mine.

JOINER. I'm all but done here now.

WOMAN. What were you at ?

JOINER. Framing the new stairs. Are you travelling ?

WOMAN. Travelling and travelling ; still walking.

JOINER. A strange place for you to be walking, here.

WOMAN. I'll swear to that : strange and miserable.

Not such another road in Christendom

The Staircase

For wind that's carrying a cruel rain
To get the better of your heart.

JOINER. I mean,
The road goes nowhere, but to these few huts
That stick against the hillside.

WOMAN. I know that—
Now I am here I know it.— But at least
The road has brought me to your fire. Young
man,
Why do you stare so? Do you know my face?
You don't belong here?

JOINER. Five miles off I live.

WOMAN. Ah . . . (*Her talk seems meant to
cover some feeling.*)

They are pretty work, your stairs :
They look too white in this curst filthy room ;
Like a mind where the dirty world has lived and
slept,
But still remembering in midst of the soil
Some childish morning spent in games and laughter
Under a blowing orchard.— (*As he is still silent.*)
Ay, queer to find fresh work in such a place.
Is the house set then to a new-comer ?

The Staircase

Who will first climb your stairs ? A girl, maybe,
Upon her wedding night. She'll slip away
From off her husband's knees, and dance up swift,
Giggling shy and happily afraid,
And the house falls quiet of their talk ; and then
The old joists creak as she moves in her undressing ;
Then the lad slinks up after, like a robber.

JOINER. It's strange ! A little while before you
came,

It was with just that fancy I was idling.

WOMAN. I warrant, you yourself were the lad,
then.

JOINER (*simply*).

Yes.

WOMAN. And the girl ?

JOINER. I don't know—rightly—

WOMAN. Which to choose ?

JOINER. O long ago I made my choice : and yet—
I have not seen her.

WOMAN (*after a little pause*). I could dream once
myself.—

(*Then amused at his simplicity.*)

But will you know her ? What would you say if I
Went up those stairs of yours ?

The Staircase

JOINER (*startled, staring at her*). You ? You ?
I did not think you were putting fun upon me.

WOMAN (*looking back at him with amused bitterness*).
Indeed, you are in the right :

I am naught to visit a young man's dreams.

But I was gibing at myself, not you :

I mind my manners : beggars thrive by them.

JOINER (*gently*). Are you begging your way ?

WOMAN. Yes ; I want food.

JOINER. If you'll come home with me—

WOMAN. Five miles away !

No, I will warm myself, and something dry

The heavy moisture that has made my skirts

Rasp the skin off my ankles.—Were the old stairs

Rotten past mending ?

JOINER. Crumbling into holes.

No nature left in the wood but must and dry-rot :

I knockt 'em into powder. The old man,

Who lived here by himself, was coming down,

And caught his heel at top ; the tread broke through,

Tript his footing—

WOMAN (*repressing eagerness*). And he hurt him-
self ?

The Staircase

JOINER. Smasht his wicked old back bone.

WOMAN. Why, you seem

To hate the man.

JOINER. A gallows snarling tyke.

WOMAN. What had you against him ?

JOINER. He would have known what

If I'd had chance to bring his wicked blood

Blushing about his ears.

WOMAN. There's a bold fellow ;

To wish he could have boxt an old man's ears !

JOINER. No ; but I would have had such words
for him,

His wizened heart had been ashamed.

WOMAN. Why, then,

Happen the old man might have boxt your ears !

JOINER. Ay, have your game with me : but if
he'd been

A giant with a rage like a burning demon's,

I would have faced his wildness.

WOMAN. Well, he's dead,

And talk's an easy thing. But I've heard tell—

For on the road, young man, your ears find out

The Staircase

Noises from every corner in the land—
I've heard he was a terrible fierce old fellow.

JOINER. Likely enough.
You'd hear, too, of the scoundrel thing he did
Upon his daughter : you could scarce miss that ;
The villainous sound of it must be ranging still.

WOMAN. But what seems loud to you among
these hills,
And a rough splash in a quiet creek of life,
Will hardly push a little shaking whisper
Into the air of the broad troubled world.—
Was it a pretty wench ?

JOINER. Why, you'd be bound,
If she were here, to think there's none in all
The room of the land could show their beauty off,
But only as lighting matches in the sun.

WOMAN. I would be bound to think so !

JOINER. Yes : she'd come,
Like you, suppose now, out of the windy rain ;
She'd have been tussling with its force against her
Like a young girl laughing with her brother
Because he plays mock-ruffian ; and the game
Would shine still in her eyes as she came in ;

The Staircase

And she'd be walking lightly with the glee
Would seem to sing in her body, all so thrilled
From the wind's pouring through her dress. It
would

Be strange to see her, a strange and lovely thing
To see her coming back here after all.

WOMAN (*laughing*). This is a wonder! And so
she's your fancy,

The girl so friendly to your loneliness!
I'll hurt myself with laughing! This is the girl
Who slipt away from whispering in the firelight
To run with pretty laughter up your stairs?

JOINER. Well, if she is?

WOMAN. Isn't it queer you know
Just how the girl would look?

JOINER. I'd swear to her!

WOMAN. And it's a minute gone, you said your
eyes

Had never lived upon her!—

JOINER. You've made me a fool now, I suppose.
You're welcome.

But I was bound to talk so, being so long
Here in the house, that somehow must, I'm sure,

The Staircase

Remember her—the timber and the stone
That felt the sound of her laughter and her ways—
WOMAN. O let's have little of that.—Why did
you play

This lying game on me ?

JOINER (*amazed*). Why did I play— ?

WOMAN (*standing up*). Lies ! Lies ! What were
all your lies for ?

JOINER (*catching her anger*). How will a roadster
know the lies from truth,

Who has to lie for her eating, lie for her lodging,
And the whole gear of her life is lies ?

WOMAN. It's true :

We lie for needs : you for a fleering scoff.

JOINER. You've had no harm from me ; and let
your tongue

Make sure of this, so long as we're in talk :

This girl, and the way the thought of her has grown
Within my brain— O, like rivers pouring
Full from the flooded hills,—

WOMAN. You'll lose yourself

Bragging her up so handsome ; I'll help you out :
This is the thing you mean ?—

The Staircase

It would be like a hand with grimy fingers
Meddling in the fine make of a clock, to let
Talk common as mine touch your fancying
That goes so smooth and chimes to you so dainty.
Well, I'll believe 'tis fancies, and not lies :
But I must have my laugh at them.

JOINER. Yes, laugh, laugh ;
It's pretty joking.—There's a girl grows up
Beautiful and sweet hearted : and there comes
A rogue sneaking into her innocence,
Wheedling and living there ; and she, dear fool,
Comforting him ; and he blabbing abroad
The simple way her love had askt him in.

WOMAN. Did he do that ?

JOINER. Yes, such a blackguard he was.
But how would a girl so happy know his mind
Was just a muddy puddle ?—She'd only see
The face of her own love there, looking back.—

WOMAN. The pitiful fool. Ah, but it's fools you
like.

JOINER. You'd like the folk who went about to
stir
That wild brute of anger in her father,

The Staircase

And pitcht their buzzing jeers just loud enough
To startle it, and make it savage her.
They quickly had him crazed. Soon as he hears
The village sniggering its dirty gossip,
And knows his daughter's come to trouble and
danger—

WOMAN. Through being a pitiful fool—

JOINER. He thrashes her,
Thrashes her, and rails her out of the house,
Childing as she was : and heavily
To trudge after the slinking runagate
Who fouled her, the poor lass must go alone.—
Five years ago it would be. O, if I'd heard,
She need not have gone crying into hiding !
And lightly I learnt the tale of it all at first :
But it slipt over my mind like a noosed wire
That snares a rabbit's neck, and the peg fails,
And puss goes free : the gin has not left go,
But tightens still and cankers into her life.
Just so the story of how they shamed the girl
Clung like a loop of wire and gnawed its hold
Upon my mind : whenever I work alone,
I'm thinking of the world breaking her spirit,

The Staircase

And turning into misery the heart

That was so blithe and singing.

Well, here's for you to laugh at. Why don't you
laugh ?

WOMAN. I'm thinking of that old man, left alone
With shame upon his age, and dying alone.

JOINER. And she has none to think of her but me !
Even the thought of kindness keeps itself
Safe from a life like hers, as rats will jump
In harbour from a boat fierce weather has strained.

WOMAN. Somebody told you that too ?—
You have the brave life, always among notions !
But you're not fair to rats. What have they done
That you should liken them to charity ?
This would be better : Vermin crawling out
From the clothes of a beggar's corpse, soon as they
feel

The warmth of their lodging chill. I have not lived
In notions, but in seeing things ; that's one : . . .
Cold morning, a white road, and at the side
A tramp lies dead of starving, and all round him . . .
Ugh ! (*Her voice begins to accuse him.*)
And I've a mind to stop you cockering

The Staircase

Your halfling blood. What right have you to be
So brave and comfortable with your dreams
Of that lost fool—you always in a house—
While she, the truth of them, goes broad awake
In agony ?

JOINER. Wouldn't I do her all
The good a man can think of ? Why must you
gibe ?

It's only that she's gone, she's never heard of.

WOMAN. She might come back.

JOINER. Be sure I'll know of it.

WOMAN. Yes, I believe you will.

Then what will you do with her ?

JOINER. What's that to you ?

WOMAN. Why, I should know what you will do
with me.

Come now ; you must have thought it out.

JOINER. With you ?

You mean . . . ? Are you for fooling me again ?

WOMAN. And bitter fooling now. I am the
girl.

JOINER. You're not. You can't be. Often I've
heard tell—

The Staircase

WOMAN. Of pretty looks and laughing ways.

Five years

Of following a tramping labourer

Will alter that. This baby's not the first,

The other two are dead. And I've been chapt,

And I've been tired out, and clemm'd and burnt

With walking through the winds and the hot days ;

It's just a frame I am beneath my clothes.

You made your fancy of my spirit breaking ;

The fancy would have been too wise to live

If it had heeded how my body fared

Out there on the road, ageing and grieving.—

Wonderful, isn't it, how dreams come true ?

JOINER. You're clever with your wiles. You've

tript me up

Once already ; but I'm not caught this time.

WOMAN. Ay, but you are ; you're trapt and
floundering.

Listen : I'll prove myself. What would bring me
here ?

The road ends in the nowhere of the hills ;

A blind man's feet could tell that from the ruts

The Staircase

And the sward that's all across it. Why should I
come

Such an unlikely way, with hunger on me

No longer anguish, but a load, a load ?

I came to find my father.— O my pride

I've eaten long since ; and poor meat it was,

No stay in it for me or for my bairn.—

I thought my dad might pay a shilling or two

For the sight of me still in my misery ;

Or maybe only a morsel ; that would do—

Stop me starving my baby. Nowhere else

Dare we be asking, or chance showing ourselves ;

For we go cunning as stoats, my man and I :

Anyone looking at us may be the law.

JOINER. You're escaping the law ?— It was not
you,

I'll vow, that did the wrong.

WOMAN.

I did my share.

You mind these rick-fires, kept the nights aglow

For near a week, until the rain set in ?—

It might have been the nights they have in the north

Among the foundries, where they smelt the iron,

And furnaces keep glaring at the clouds

The Staircase

Till it's like red-hot weather above the darkness.—
I reckon we had you watching the sky ! Each night
A blazing rick, ten or twelve miles from the last !—
He swore he'd rouse the land. No one at all
Would give us jobs—a tramp and his homeless doxy.
And a queer time I had with him and his fists ;
Till the rage seemed to addle in his brain,
And he could think of naught but stacks to fire.
But he'll be tried for blood as well as burning,
If it's the truth we heard. A shippen caught
And sent the blaze along its thatch to the house ;
And in the scare there was a child forgot
That slept alone in the attic.— Well, my boy
Is like to be clemm'd for his death : it's all one,
Hunger and cold, or fire.— I hope the lad
Was stifled first, though ; I've been praying that.

JOINER. And it's you telling me this, as calm as
news

Of prices at the market !

WOMAN.

Now do you see ?

I've put myself clean into your mercy.

Would I have riskt your mind, without I were

Your own fine dream rousing you into daylight ?—

The Staircase

This takes you down from your fool'd life, I think !

So will you give us up, my man and I ?

He's known for his talk : there'll be a cry abroad

After us, I'll be bound.— You'll not, I know ;

Because I am your lovely dream come true.—

Surely 'tis time you were pleased.

JOINER.

O let me be !

Give me a little while to breathe myself.

WOMAN.

Indeed

It goes up hill, out of a dream to truth.

But I've come down a little ; I thought to find

My old angry father ; and I find you !—

Now, are we right yet ? Or shall I tell you where

The stairs were rotted worst ?— Third from top :

Half of it flimsy and soft as blanket, half

Gaping open.

JOINER. Ay, there the old brute tript.

WOMAN. And with him died our last poor chance
of food.

We'd best be off now, baby. (*But she makes
no attempt to go. A short pause ; then she
laughs.*)

The Staircase

JOINER. Will you forgive me ?

WOMAN. What, for making me
Your fancy game ?— I've had worse things to carry.

JOINER. O make an end of that talk !—It's the
truth

I have at last, after all my dreaming.

WOMAN. I'll lay, it seems like when they scorch
a pig

After a killing !—Rubbish of straw and waste
Flares high and bold in a wind of golden flame
And streaking sparks—a young man's mind of fancies.
Then 'tis a mound of smoulder, crumbling in
To show parcht awkward trotters sticking up,
Flap ears and senseless snouted head, and all
The poor pig's blacken'd hulk : and there's the truth
Was hid inside a young man's burning dreams !—
Well, I am not the sop I was ; there is
A dry side to me now. So I'll be kind
And take the truth I am out of your sight.

JOINER. I let you go ? You think that's likely
yet ?

WOMAN (*uneasy*). Are you for doing like the fool
shown up

The Staircase

Who braves his folly out by staying in it ?

JOINER. You shall stay in it, too !— It goes up
hill,

You said, the way out of my dream ; up hill
And the sun behind the hill ! And now I've climbed
Where nothing stops the light, not even dreams.
We'll not get higher than this, either of us.
If we can't hold now to our meeting here,
Here on the top of life, where every side
Is a slope falling, 'tis for both of us,
From this on, going downward into shadows,
Never again to be in sight or hail.

WOMAN. If I'm not gone quickly, we're both in
danger.

JOINER. Will you not dare believe my meaning ?

WOMAN. No.—

I'll only think, " Suppose, suppose he meant it ! "—

JOINER. Why, we're awake, and the dream still
crying aloud !

WOMAN. You close your mind to it. No hurt in
dreams :

But this that sounds so drawing—safer would be

The Staircase

A viper hissing. 'Tis the truth of the world
Persuading you to come into its reach.

JOINER. And the sound's drawing you !

WOMAN. O, I must hear
Everything I have lost—everything
That is not the old cunning torturer,
The world's merciless truth !—You'd never keep me
Safe from the world in hiding of your dreams ;
The world would come for me, and strike you
there.

I to be looking for a dream again,
And you for truth to please you like your dreams——
It would be a wild-hearted game to play !

JOINER. I did not mean it for a game, the
while

I've been as good to my mind as to the steel
I work with, all for the sake of finding you :
Rusted metal, you know, may be wrought clean
As glass, but the rust lies within, for ever
Spoiling the finest temper.

WOMAN. Can you not see
The rust of the world has eaten to my heart ?

The Staircase

JOINER. Can you not see that my main life has
been

Knowing of you held by the handling world
All as it likes, and I the one to wring
The vile grasp off from you? Don't make my life
Break its promise to me, so nearly kept!—
I have gone hungry for this hour.

WOMAN. And I,
Have I not hunger'd? Thank your God you kept
Your hunger empty. I famisht, and was fed
On filthy poison, worse than being starved.
—I never thought to have a mind again
That need not be ashamed of being alive!—
You do not mean I should—love you?

JOINER. No, no ;
We are not bargaining.

WOMAN. I doubt I could not,
Even if I were wishing to.—
Listen to me. Think God is eyeing you,
And tell me fairly, 'tis a man's set mind
You have to—help me.

JOINER. I'll make you another life !
'Tis your say now.

The Staircase

WOMAN. Sometimes it might be,
In the hot dusty drouth of afternoon,
We'd pass a byre, and hear the milkers chat,—
Girls laughing,—and spirted milk ring in the cans.
Or plodding stupidly on in windy dark,
Our steps would sound against a cottage wall
Sleeping beside the lane : I'd lean on it ;
Warmth would be in it ; I'd think of a drowsy fire
Inside the house, and hear the crickets chime.—
Young man, I'll risk you ! Let us be off, quick,
Else he'll be coming in on us.

JOINER. He ? Who ?

WOMAN. The man that was my man.

JOINER. He's nothing now.

WOMAN. He was my man.

JOINER. No need to think of him.
I've naught to say but—thank you.

WOMAN. Thank me ?

JOINER. Yes !

Now I've a thing to do at last.

WOMAN. But you,
Never you look to have me thanking you ;
For that might set me telling what I've been,

The Staircase

The shame I have been, the dirt !— You must not know it.

(*With a gesture.*) O but if there is something in the world

That can do good, and listens when 'tis called,
I shall be asking it to stay with you ;
You have made room for me where never again
I thought to live.— It goes beyond my thanks.

JOINER. There's stumbling outside, coming up
the path.

WOMAN. We should have gone before this !—
'Tis my man.

(*The TRAMP comes in.*)

TRAMP. Now where's the food ?

WOMAN. My father's dead, they tell me.

TRAMP. I don't want your father ; I'm for eating.
You said there'd be food here.

WOMAN. 'Tis not my fault ;
How could I know if he were gone or living ?

TRAMP. O, you keep on like a parrot. Food's
the thing.

WOMAN. A thing you'll have to walk some further
for.

The Staircase

TRAMP. Why did you turn us here? To play
hot-cockles

Safe with a lad?

JOINER (*to the WOMAN*). You're not to talk with
him.

TRAMP. Not talk?—She'll have to talk about the
food

She made out we'd be having here. Where is it?

WOMAN. Are you fuddled? There's none here.

TRAMP. None, by God!

Not a bite?

WOMAN. Not a bite.

TRAMP (*going towards her*). Then take your
lesson!

You'll feel my ten commandments now: you'll learn
The way of them by heart.

*(The woman, standing up, instinctively picks up
the baby and holds it as her protection.)*

Lay the brat down!

Put down that bastard, or he'll grow up lame

As you'll be when I've done you.

(She lays the baby down and faces him.)

Ay, that's wiser:

The Staircase

You mind what came of that trick once ?—And now
I'll twinge your arm till it crackles.

WOMAN. No, not that !

JOINER. I've payed out rope enough. I'll fasten
it now

Taut, and you've hung yourself.—Round on your
heels

And out of doors !

TRAMP. This isn't your ado ;

Keep out.

JOINER. You march now : I'll not bid you again.

TRAMP. Have I to down you first before I tan
My woman ? Do you call that fair ? It's low.
I'm hunger-starved and done—just enough heart
Left in me for lathering her ; and you
Push in, you with your belly crammed and good :
It's low ! Stand off and be an Englishman.

JOINER. You're too long standing. Will you have
your teeth

So quaked in your head, you'll never chew again
Happily ? Off out of this !

TRAMP (*half whimpering with weakness and anger*).

Mate, fair play.

The Staircase

Too bad it is. She cheats me of a meal
And should be taught right. Ay, and you'd have
seen,

If she had kept her word and found me meat,
I am a man when I'm fed could do for you
And lick her finely as well out of her lies :
A job for each hand that. But now—
There's nothing fair in the world, after this !

JOINER. You'll have it then ?

TRAMP (*in a rage*). And empty as I be
I'll match you : win or lose, she'll pay me for it
When we're alone.

WOMAN (*looking out through the open door*). Have
you been showing yourself ?

TRAMP (*apprehensive at once*). What is it now ?

WOMAN. Three men, mighty cautious,
And almost here.

TRAMP. They'll not find me. (*Making
for the door.*)

WOMAN. You fool,
They're right in front.

TRAMP. You bitch, you have me trapt !

The Staircase

O I will need to go into hard training
If I'm to pay you the fair price for this !

WOMAN. Ay, shout to them "Here's your
man !"

TRAMP. What will I do ?—
Up the stairs and out of a window and off,
That's my road. (*He goes upstairs.*)

WOMAN. There's the first to take your stairs !

JOINER. And a good use for them ; it quits us
of him.

(*Three Men come in—1, 2, & 3.*)

1. Ay, there he is !

2. The man !

3. The very man !

I markt him well, nosing the taproom whiff
Beside the door, and fearing to go in.

1. You see his cunning ?

2. Why, he's washt his face !

3. 'Tis that ! I thought he lookt another man !

1. But not this way you'll put off eyes like
ours.

WOMAN. O will they take him ?— I'd not plotted
that !

The Staircase

JOINER. Ay, the thing plans itself, once we can
hold

Their crazy pother.

WOMAN.

Keep them blundering

A while, a little while !

2.

We'll have to go

Carefully about him.

3.

Ay, 'tis a face

With gallows in it. When I saw him leant

Beside the taproom door, with his eyes cadging,

I thought, " There's a slaughtering visnomy ! "

1. I've no notion at all of seeing him hanged

For murdering me.

2.

Young fellow, own to yourself !

You're the rick-burner.

3.

Ay, and he burnt a lad.

JOINER. Do hold your blathering a bit and hear me.

Or if you won't, see this. (*Holding up a hammer.*)

1.

He means battery !

2. Dreadful things can be done with a hammer.

3.

When he

That uses it is wild and knows the way

Through your skull and into your brain.

The Staircase

JOINER. Do stop !
I am the joiner here. Yonder's my work,
The staircase. And the man you want has bolted
Up to the loft, and you have him caged and safe.

1. Are there weapons upstairs ?

JOINER. Go on and take him.
The room's bare boards and walls, and he's as weak
With famishing as a fly.

2. Well, if you're sure
You're not the man——

3. No, no ; I saw right off
He had the look of someone else.

1 (*Marshalling them at the staircase*). Now for it !

2. Mind the reward that's posted for him !

3. Charge !
(*They rush up the stairs.*)

JOINER. This falls out well. Here's an easy
riddance,
And the way smooth from here.

WOMAN. Were you not told
To break out larger windows in the attics ?
They're cruel small !

The Staircase

JOINER. Cruel and small indeed
To one who thinks of squeezing his escape
Through any of them.— But I can hear they have
him.

(*The three men come down with the TRAMP.*)

1. The man for certain this time.

TRAMP. Copt! copt!

WOMAN. We couldn't flee for ever. Is it far,
The way to the jail? They'll give us food there,
likely.

2 (*to the WOMAN*). What, are you coming too?

WOMAN. Yes, I'm coming.

3. Were you in with his burnings?

WOMAN. They are mine
As much as his. I screened his light from draughts.

JOINER. He made her do it!—(*to the WOMAN*)
There's no need for this!

TRAMP. Copt is the word!

WOMAN. And I am glad it's over.

JOINER. It's over right enough; the whole black
time

The Staircase

Is over now. Must you see him to jail ?
How can you make your duty such a thing ?

WOMAN. You'll never want a flatterer, young
man,

Not while your own tongue lives. Who said I made
Going with him my duty ?

I. Settle your mind

And choose your man, missis : come on or stay.

WOMAN. And you talk civil, mister ! Choose my
man !

JOINER (*to the TRAMP*). You will not drag her
with you ?

WOMAN. O, you have

Queer sense in you ! Who's dragging me at all ?

JOINER (*to the TRAMP*). Have you not had enough
of injuring her ?

Go off from her at last !

TRAMP. Copt ! Fair copt !

WOMAN. Thank you for lending me your fire,
young man.

(*To the men.*) Not budging yet ?

(*They begin to go out.*)

The Staircase

Bless my wits, I was leaving you the brat !

Is it still raining ? I must lap him well :

There is a trouble in his breath already.

*(When the JOINER is left alone and the door
closed, the curtain comes down.)*

The Deserter

In front of a cottage in the country. Early morning.

The door of the cottage opens and several men and women come out ; they stand talking on the flagged garden path, before they disperse.

1ST WOMAN. Why, it's bright morning !

1ST MAN. And a fresh air 'tis !

2ND WOMAN. Like coming out of a tunnel—
such a noise

The night has been.

1ST WOMAN. And such a stifle of folk !

My head's bewilder'd.

1ST MAN. Wash you in the dew,
The same as when you were a young thing.

1ST WOMAN. Nay !

I've all my age just now, and a deal more :

As likely to be skittish as if I'd seen

My own time dated in the almanac,

As settled as the assizes.

The Deserter

2ND MAN (*a very old man.*) Well, what a mood
For a fine morning!— You keep too soft a heart,
A heart like dough, no sad affair can touch
Without it pinches. You should have a heart
Like mine, crisp as a quartern loaf new-baked
With the warmth lively in it—to feel the morn
Kindle your senses again after you've seen
Another fellow's candle-light snufft out.

1ST WOMAN. Well, I'm just daunted, when I've
seen death busy.

2ND MAN. And we left still alive to smell the
air!—
Never a death now, but I feel as if
It took a parcel of years from off my back :
I'll have a spine like a sapling soon.—My word,
This garden favours pinks ! Better than mine !
Look what a flourish of pinks !

2ND WOMAN. When I'm to die,
I'll not have windows closed and a blinded room ;
I'll have the morning blow right in on me,
And have some gleam of green things in my eyes.
You mind, all of you : else I'll die so loud,
Peter's noise would be a buzzing to it.

The Deserter

1ST WOMAN. And I'll not have my dying day a
show

For all the swarming neighbours.

2ND MAN (*the old one.*) I'll be there :

I'll give you a send-off.

1ST WOMAN. You old jackal !

You'll have your proper gait by then ; you'll be

Going about four-footed.

1ST MAN. You won't take,

We'll hope, missis, such a wild way of dying

As Peter took ; there'll be no call for us

To come and manage you.

3RD MAN. I thought, one while,

He'd fight us down.

1ST MAN. He gave my neck a wrench

Will keep me minding him all day, poor man ;—

Specially as 'tis hoeing turnips for me.

2ND WOMAN. I had my mind made up and my

skirts gathered

To clear the stairs in a jump, and chance my legs,

When he seemed freeing himself : I never saw

Such vengeance in a man's eyes.

1ST MAN.

Ay, you mean

The Deserter

The fit he had of taking Turpin's face
For the Kayser looking in on him? Indeed,
He bounded under the clothes same as a salmon
Leaping a waterfall.

1ST WOMAN. Anyone would suppose
His glare was on some great marauding face,
The picture of foreign wickedness and murder,
He did take Turpin's looks to heart so bad.
Yet it's a homely make of face; you'd say,
Surely, if there's plain English anywhere,
It's Turpin's face.

3RD MAN (*Turpin*). Never you mind my looks.

1ST MAN. Peter minded them, worse than a slug
minds salt:

A glance of you made him a foaming man.
"I'll give you Belgium," says he: and I'm sure
He'd have had Turpin's face ript from his head
If I'd been slack a jiffy.

2ND WOMAN. Then 'twas hell:
Hell was under the bedstead, burning for him.

1ST WOMAN. You could nigh see the flames
come groping up,
He dodged them so.

The Deserter

2ND MAN (*the old one*). But what is hell for him
now,

Is thinking of us alive with the sun in our eyes,
And air and the taste of morning in our mouths ;
And me noting the larkspurs and the lupins,
And how I beat him there, for all his pinks
Do wonders—thinking of this and knowing himself
A dead thing from now on :—that's hell, I'm sure !

1ST MAN. He ought not to have gone so quick
by rights ;

The doctor gave him longer.

3RD MAN.

He'd never bide

By doctor's talk. " No drink "—that was the word :
But Peter'd not be meddled with, not he.

2ND WOMAN. And lying abed never to dress
again

He drove his wife to keep the whisky pouring—
A terrible foolhardy drink for him,
As well he knew.

1ST WOMAN. Indeed, she would be driven,
Poor girl, if he miscall'd her half as much
As he miscall'd Jack Turpin's face to-night.

The Deserter

3RD MAN (*Turpin*). O let it be.

1ST MAN. Well, now the next affair
Is breakfast, I suppose.

2ND WOMAN. Mine will be cheap.
Breakfast ! when I'd be chawing to the din
Of a dead man shouting like a monster at me :
“ I say they might as well cut off my head
As do the things inside of me they're doing ! ”

1ST WOMAN. “ Catch my head,” he cries to me,
“ catch my head :
There it goes bouncing past you down the stairs,
And every bump a souse of my best blood.”—
I'll dream to-night of lobbing Peter's head
Up the staircase to him on the landing :
And he to catch it there and clap it down
Splash on his shoulders, and grin down to me.

2ND MAN (*the old one*). Don't ! You will start a
mischief in my brain,
To rouse in the night and sneak out, filling my sleep
With dreams of blood.

1ST WOMAN. If it's of your own blood,
It will be dreams of vinegar.

2ND MAN. Be quiet !—

The Deserter

To dream of blood would mean I'm going to die,
Certain as stabbing. And I don't want to die.

1ST MAN. Nor I; so let's be shambling. I'm
half clemm'd.

2ND WOMAN. Ay, go about your breakfast, do!
—That's all

The trouble a man has, to scoff his meals.

3RD MAN (*moving off*). So Peter's gone! Gone
off like gunpowder!

A flaring way to die!

1ST MAN. We used to call him
Old Jolly-Nose, at the inn.

1ST WOMAN. And you may say
His best friend killed him.

1ST MAN. Ay, 'tis things like this
Give drink a bad name . . .

*(They go off severally and leave the stage
empty awhile.)*

*(Presently LUTHER strolls in: he is a tall,
loose-limbed, cheerful, good-natured looking
man; bearded, slovenly, somewhat older
than middle-age.)*

The Deserter

LUTHER. Quiet, eh?—That should mean he's made his end.—

Now what's the mood, I wonder?—Hi! In there! Missis!

(A little girl runs out of the house and flings into his arms.)

Why, sweetheart, you're about betimes! Where will your mother be?

THE GIRL. Upstairs.

LUTHER. Alone?

THE GIRL. I'm frightened.

LUTHER. No, not frightened now?

THE GIRL. The house

Has gone so quiet.

LUTHER. Not frightened now, though, honey?

THE GIRL. Mother says Daddy's dead.—O let's go off

And play at something.

LUTHER. I've a word or two

First for your mother. What is she doing? Crying?

THE GIRL. Saying her prayers.

LUTHER. That will not help her much.

The Deserter

Run you and fetch her here.

THE GIRL.

No, no, I won't !

I'll not go into the house again.

LUTHER.

You shan't :

An idle-witted chap I was to say it.

Why, I'd not go in there myself ! So now

Let's try if hollaring will bring her out.

Missis !—Join in.—Missis !

THE GIRL.

Mother, mother !

LUTHER. We have moved something. I heard a
door shut to.—

How would you like to have me for your daddy ?

THE GIRL (*reproachful, pushing away from him*).

O now you go and spoil it !

LUTHER.

What's to do ?

And you such friends with me !

THE GIRL.

But if you were

My daddy, you would be slapping me, I know.

LUTHER. Slapping ? . . . Good God, the stuff
they make men of !

No ; I can tell you, 'twill be games all day

When I'm your daddy : slapping's done with now.

(MARTHA comes out of the cottage door.)

The Deserter

MARTHA. What are you putting in her mind ?

LUTHER (*to the GIRL*). Run off.

I'll find you soon. Think how'll we'll spend the morning.

Wading the stream for loaches ?

THE GIRL. O yes, that !

LUTHER. Be scarce then for a while, little sweet-heart. (*THE GIRL runs off.*)

That's an old promise. She's agog to feel
Her first loach under her toes, squirming and slipping,

Trapt on the gravel. Have no thought for her ;
I'll give my day to her and keep her cheered.
I'm very sure it's wrong, out-and-out wrong,
To let a child be startled with the gliff
Of the real thing inside our talk of death.

MARTHA. So I'm to have the child against me too ?

LUTHER. If I can ply you anyway with her,
I'll see I have her mind and let my will
Strain upon you through her : that's only sense.—
But she's the weakest of the ropes I've hitched
About you. You are muddled, I dare say,

The Deserter

With Peter dying ; the fuss still goes on
About your wits like a flood pushing past
A willow, tugging at the branches, long
After it has done raining : you may forget
How firm I've fastened you to what I mean.
So here I've done the friendly thing, and come
To give you the mere hint the ropes still hold
I have had rigged about you this good while.

MARTHA. 'Twas kindly thought of.

LUTHER. Only a slight twitch,
A tingling jerk or two : you will soon feel
The purchase I have got on you. And then,
Soon as the ropes begin to tell on you,
You'll come my way, I hope, of your own motion,
Before I need to start winding them in.

MARTHA. It would be best to say out what you
want.

LUTHER. What I want ?—Whose is that house ?

MARTHA. 'Tis mine
Now, I suppose.

LUTHER. And I suppose it's mine.
And that's the very thing the law supposes.
Why, if I took your house, your traps and sticks,

The Deserter

Everything—sent you off stript like a nigger—
Would that half fill, ay, or a quarter fill
The rummage Peter has made in my affairs,
Scattering money of mine as a terrier kicks
The earth behind him, burrowing in a warren ?

MARTHA. Is so much owing ?—I could work it
off,
Maybe ; and I've some money hid.

LUTHER. You've not :
It is my money you've in hiding, mine.
Just let me hammer that into your brain,
Clean through, and rivet it on t'other side.
I say you're naught, naught but body and soul,
Just your own nature : all your belongings now
Are packt up in your skin. There : is that clencht ?
Bless you, Peter was in and out of my purse
Like playing at lucky bag : half-crowns and tizzies,
Ten pound notes and sovereigns—all one to him.
And it's all written down, what Peter fingered,
Written and fairly signed—fair as he could :
I've seen him sign half on the paper and half
On the deal table top, when he was owlsh.
But it's a book I have, a regular bible,

The Deserter

Of I O U and Peter's name— O, pages !

Well : the world round about knows, and you
know,

My money goes from me to bring in gain.

There's other gain than cash, though ; I've a mind
To marry.

MARTHA. You should have all there is to know
Of marrying by heart.

LUTHER. Why, not quite all.
The twice I've married so far, you may say,
Has been just doing business : good strokes, both.
But too much business stiffens upon a man
Till he is shell'd tight as a tortoise : I'm strong
On a man marrying once in his life at least
For pleasure. And it's you I'll have for pleasure.

MARTHA. And I'm a dummy in this bargain ?

LUTHER. Yes :
I don't see what you'd have to say ; it's struck.
But once we can look back on the deal made good,
You'll find me the easiest temper in the parish ;
It's just that I must have my way.

MARTHA. You won't !
You sell me up and see if I care a wink !

The Deserter

LUTHER. I know what's speaking now ; I've a good ear :

You have your fancy still for that young fellow.

Well, turn it out. He's off to the war, and that

Will keep him doing for a smart spell yet.

You've him to thank, though, that I took this gait,

Spinning my money into a tackle upon you ;

I've seen him eyeing you.—Well, the last knot

That wanted tying was Peter's death ; so now,

Shall I not start the pully-haul before

Johnny comes marching home—a sergeant-major !

MARTHA. I'd laugh at this in a tale.

LUTHER. What's the strange thing ?

MARTHA. You so cheering yourself with wickedness

And relishing the injuries you've done

And mean to do still ; and the man you set

Death tracking after, like a dog on a hare,

Lying within a stride of you !

LUTHER. I set

Death on his track ?

MARTHA. What else was your money

But death hot-foot after him ?—Then to come here

The Deserter

With a brag about it all !—Ay, and bidding
Me to stand in with you !

LUTHER. Don't make it out
Such mighty news ! I dare say it has been
A long time winding in and out of your thoughts,
Much like a taking tune that will keep humming.
Why, Peter meant it himself.

MARTHA. Peter meant it ?

LUTHER. We had it square as if a lawyer wrote it.
He'd come with his palm held out, easy and
brazen,

The figure of churchwarden handing the plate.
“ Time for another payment,” he would say ;
“ You know the pledge ; and all I bargain for
Is this : keep cool about her till I'm dead.
But if you saw the years I'm going to live,
You'd have a turn.”—Well, he's had the turn.—
Come : you are known for duty. 'Twas a good wife
Who stuck so nobly to her man's dying wish
For liquor : stand by him now in this thing too.

MARTHA. And if he'd said, in one of his snarling
whimsies,
“ Sup poison when I'm gone : dose yourself full

The Deserter

Of sheep-dip,"—I'd be meek about that too?—
And I'd as lief do that as go with you.

LUTHER. O you're the kind for me! Let's have
a flare,
Brave me! I cannot away with quiet women;
I'm for the fire-works.—I've had this to do
Twice already.

MARTHA. Had what to do?

LUTHER. Why, tame
A woman's mind. I make no more of it
Than brushing the nap of a tall hat shiny again.
It seems as if there's something living in me
Women have to obey.

MARTHA. My mind's my own.

LUTHER. Is that why you daren't look me in the
face?

MARTHA. Pooh, daren't I!

LUTHER. But in my eyes?
No, that you daren't;
Dare you, Martha?—Martha, look in my eyes!

*(Speaking very gently, with his hands on her
shoulders.)*

Look in my eyes and don't blink till I tell you.

The Deserter

Now you see how it is. You'll banter me
Just as much as you please, say you?—But no ;
It's just as much as I please, isn't it ?
Isn't it, Martha ? Those keen scorning thoughts,
It's I who let them cluster in your brain,
Isn't it, Martha ? Your mind's in my grasp
As if I held a dandelion-clock
Before me in my fingers : one good puff,
And the pretty down's adrift, loose in the air :
The very way I'll scatter, when I choose,
The dearest thoughts you have.—Now you may
blink. (*Letting her go.*)
You saw the picture, though.

MARTHA (*dully*). My mind's my own.

LUTHER. Why, say that, if you like, over and
over.

But every time the words bob up to be said,
Think you can see me smiling to myself,
Holding a dandelion-clock before me
And musing, Shall I blow ? Shall I blow now ?

MARTHA. O don't ! don't !

LUTHER. And you'll remember how you lookt in
my eyes :

The Deserter

You'll feel my hands weighing on your shoulders,
And you not able to blink against my gaze,
And being steeped in what looks out of me,
Like a white cloth steeping in scarlet dye.

MARTHA. I hate you : you know that.

LUTHER.

That's your affair.

Much better love me. The thing is, you're fast,
You're mine. Be sure, though, I shan't trouble you :
Nor need to trouble myself. You can stay here
And act the widow handsomely awhile.
All you will feel will be a kind of drowse
Settling down on you, gently, very gently—
Like sleepiness, when you're awake too long,
That seems to fasten cobwebs, thousands of them,
Round your limbs, softly clinging and tingling,
Until the flossy threads have wound you tight,
Lapt hand and foot in a cocoon as firm
As rope ; and sleep can suck your spirit out.
But you are the one to know, after these nights,
Who wins at last, when it's a fight with sleep.
Well : so you'll feel me spin my silky thought
About your mind, and hold you in the end
Graspt and helpless, and handling you like steel.

The Deserter

MARTHA. Is that what those two other women felt ?

LUTHER. Very likely.

MARTHA. And I am to be the third
To go the way they went ?

LUTHER. Why, yes : to church.

MARTHA. To church feet foremost, yes. Where are they now ?

LUTHER. Well, they are dead ; and come to think of it,

Where is your husband ? And dead as my wives are
They didn't drink themselves dead : they went off
In sound respectable diseases both ;
The doctor guaranteed them.

MARTHA. I dare say
He'll do the same for me.

LUTHER. When the time comes.

MARTHA. And that's for you to say ?

LUTHER. Pull up ! Fancy's running away with you.

Turn her into the lane that leads to church ;
That's where a widow likes to think of going.—
So ! Nothing like a chat for straightening things !

The Deserter

We know where we are now, Martha. I'll go find
The lass, and make a ploy up for the day.
She shall be blithe, I promise! I can touch
Her little mind like harping on it, and keep
A tune of laughter chiming there as bright
As sunny water. She'll tell you I'm the one
To make her happy, Martha: and you, too!
The only thing is—I must have my way. (*He goes.*)

MARTHA. Must you! Not this time.

*(She goes to the door of an outhouse, opens it
and peers in.)*

Sound asleep, poor boy!
He said he'd had to walk most of the way.

*(She goes in; and shortly after comes out with
a young soldier.)*

MARTHA. Well, and what if they do see? You're
on leave.

SOLDIER. I'm not.

MARTHA. Then how . . . ?

SOLDIER. You said I had to come.

There is no leave: we're going out—I mean
They are. I'm a deserter.

The Deserter

MARTHA. What's the right name
For me, I wonder ?

SOLDIER. Nay, they won't touch you.
You made me do it, but it's me that did it ;
And it is me they'll lag.

MARTHA. We'll get round that ;
You'll see.

SOLDIER. And how will I get round it, Martha ?
Can you see that ?—They're going out, and I
Deserted.—Well ? You said I had to come ?—
Nobody ever gave a woman aught
That cost the same as this !—But let that be.
It was for you.

MARTHA. O, but for both of us !
And we will put it right. We'll put all right ;
There's a deal more than this. But you don't
know.
We're safe now.

SOLDIER. Where is a deserter safe ?

MARTHA. O that's easy.

SOLDIER. Is it ? You made me come,
And now you slight it.

MARTHA. O, I don't, I don't !

The Deserter

But worse might be. I had to have you here :
I durstn't let you go to France just now !

SOLDIER. What is it ? How's that drunken . . .

MARTHA. He's . . . he's dead.

SOLDIER. Good Christ ! Why didn't you say ?

MARTHA. I was going to tell you.

SOLDIER. When did he die ?

MARTHA. This morning.

SOLDIER. Was it your guess
That this was nearing made you write so wild ?

MARTHA. Suppose you'd gone to France ! That
was the terror—

You would be gone, before . . .

SOLDIER. And not come back ?

It does no good, letting such thoughts run on.

MARTHA. But it's not only that. If he had
died

While you were overseas !—Doesn't it sound
Wicked to say, Thank God for such a thing !

SOLDIER. This morning !—While I was asleep
in there ?

MARTHA. The wonder is, you could sleep through
last night.

The Deserter

SOLDIER. The wonder is your letter had no word

That this was coming ; and not a word of this
When you were smuggling me away in there.

MARTHA. You were too tired. But all this is nothing.

We'll go away to-night : the road's clear now.

SOLDIER. I've only one clear road—the way I came :

Give myself up.

MARTHA. O but I've planned it all.

Everything will be safe, you'll see. We'll start
Tramping to-night—

SOLDIER. Where to ?

MARTHA. Why, anywhere !

Three days' hard going—a hundred miles away—
You take another name and marry me—

I have the money by—and the next day
Enlist again. You're straight then with the army,
And I'm safe out of here. O we must do it !

SOLDIER. And what would all this crazy work be for ?

MARTHA. But what else can you see ?

The Deserter

SOLDIER. I've told you once :
Give myself up.

MARTHA. O where's the gain in that ?
Why not go smooth and easy when you can ?

SOLDIER. A fine smooth thing, to be called a
deserter !

MARTHA. But you'll enlist again : that's not
deserting.

SOLDIER. Won't it be, if I meet one of my mates !
You've made me a pretty figure—and for why,
I'm puzzled.

MARTHA. Well, not for fun.

SOLDIER. For all the sense
I see in it, it might be that.

MARTHA. You don't
See, I suppose, I've made myself all yours ?

SOLDIER. O Martha, was there any need to shame
me ?
He's gone, the staggering sot who fleered between
us ;

Could we not wait ?

MARTHA. No !—Do you want me still ?

The Deserter

SOLDIER. Well, I've deserted for you: I've
sneakt off

Cringing away from men who were my sworn
friends

Just when the danger's sighted.—Don't I know
How, when their talk happens upon my name,
They'll spit it out as if they tasted dirt!

And you say, do I want you?—I wish I didn't!

MARTHA. You've done this for me. Now there's
more to do.

And if it were ten times worse than what you've done
I'd ask you for it.

SOLDIER. I'll be bound you would;
And I suppose I'd do it.

MARTHA. You'd have to do it.
You don't know what the work's been here, while I
Have been alone, and you've been—smartly soldier-
ing.

You don't know what it is to feel the chance
Of what may happen to you, like a live thing
Watching you—sitting there quietly, with bright
eyes

Smouldering like a fiend's, hungering at you,

The Deserter

Croucht there waiting, set like the spring of a trap,

Eyeing the strain you make to keep away ;
And still you are pusht sideling nearer and nearer ;—

Until it comes to him, the panther's moment,
To leap and hug me against his loathsome breath !

SOLDIER. Why, what's all this ?

MARTHA. It's Luther, Luther ! He means
To have me : and there's one person in the world
Who is to say whether he shall or no.

SOLDIER. That should be you.

MARTHA. Me !—Nay, Peter has made
All his belongings over to his old friend !

SOLDIER. That's not a way to talk.—And do you
mean
You've brought me here with my brain buzzing the
word

Like clockwork . . .

MARTHA. What word ?

SOLDIER. Deserter, deserter !
Whatever I hear now, there'll be that word in it !
And all because an old blackguardly man

The Deserter

Shows you he has a mind to marry you.

Why, it's a joke.

MARTHA. I'll make you understand
Some day. I'm pawned to him—but that is nothing ;
I've not a thing of my own : everything here
Is charity, Luther's charity ; and still
I make nothing of that.—But you would think
I'd have a right to my own mind ! And even
That he has taken.

SOLDIER. How can you talk so trifling ?

MARTHA. I'm in his hands like—but you'll think
that silly :

Only it is so ; as long as I stay here
He need no more than breathe—and all I am,
All that my life knows for its very own,
Would scatter like flighty down.—But I'll try this.
There was a story in the papers : how a woman
Was walking in the tropics by herself,
And one of those huge monkeys carried her off.
They got her back ; she said, as the beast came close,
Snarling with pleasure to be handling her,
The life in her stood fixt : her flesh set hard
As gritstone at his twitching fondling paws,

The Deserter

And yet she was all one nerve of blinding horror.
The story is me and Luther. And there's worse :
I have the notion of him reaching out
A grasp upon my mind, plucking it like—
O like plucking a dandelion-clock
To blow it away with " Loves me—loves me not."

SOLDIER. There's more in this than I can well
make out.

MARTHA. More than anyone can : let it alone.
You've come ; that's the main thing. Don't make
it now

All for nothing ! Take me away from here !
Marry me, make me your own property
Nobody else can touch—then, what you please :
Everything after that is all yours, yours.
But away from here, away from here !

SOLDIER. All right.
Since you have got me here, I may as well
Go through.

MARTHA. We'll start to-night ; you'll hide till
then.

SOLDIER. Hide ! Yes, I'm getting clever now at
hiding !

The Deserter

MARTHA. And I'll creep round to my sister's,
and make sure

The child will be well used.—Is it so hard
To give me this ? The choice you have is not
My life or death ; but am I to live clean flesh
Or foul as a weeping sore full of maggots.

SOLDIER. You needn't go on telling me ; I
believe you.

I had the choice of being a passable man
Or a swindling sneak-thief lily-livered deserter.
I've chosen as you askt me ; and why not
Go on that way ? It will not harm me now.

MARTHA. Why, but you talk as though I only
take
And cannot give.

SOLDIER. Well, that's how it is, it seems.
I am not grumbling. What is there you can give ?
It's been a cruel price, and I'm right glad
It's been all mine to pay.

MARTHA. O I am sure
This will be rankling soon.

SOLDIER. You're hard to please.

The Deserter

I've paid the shot for both of us, and make
No grudge of it.

MARTHA. Then we start out of tune,
And you will come to hate me.

SOLDIER. Have I not proved
I love you? Have I not made myself for you
A thing I loathe? What is it now you want?
Am I to cheer about it?

MARTHA. I have not asked
For what I'd shirk myself—for both of us.

SOLDIER. I know, I know. I am all out of
tune.

MARTHA. The giving has not all been yours.

SOLDIER. I know.
You've had vile things to bear.

MARTHA. But you are glad
Our lives at last are our own?

SOLDIER. Yes, yes!

MARTHA. And that
Is what it has been mine to give.

SOLDIER. You gave it?
But it was Peter's death!—My God! I had
Forgotten the poor beast is lying in there!

The Deserter

MARTHA. Ay, it's a marvel what you can forget
When you are put to it—everything you've grown up
with.

SOLDIER. What made him die ?

MARTHA. The neighbours say it was
The way he drank : he'd sooner drink than live.

SOLDIER. Do you say that ?

MARTHA. I know he wisht to live.
O horribly he wisht to go on living !

SOLDIER. And yet his demon made him kill
himself !

MARTHA. Yes. I was his demon.—There had to
be an end !—

And Luther always strolling by the house,
Pleasantly scanning around at crops and meadows,
But never a flicker of looking for me, as though
He past a thing here too familiarly
His own, to bother with a glance at it !
There had to be an end !—And with you here !—
Well, I have done it. Is this not giving something ?

SOLDIER. My God ! What have you given me ?

A murder ?

You killed him ?

The Deserter

MARTHA. Nobody could call it murder.
I let him kill himself.

SOLDIER. He did not want to die :
You were just saying so.

MARTHA. That's true ; it was
A thing so hideous, I wonder I don't laugh
To think of it. Longing to live he was ;
And whimpering to himself to stop, he'd reach
To grope if there were liquor handy.—O,
The bottle was always there !

SOLDIER. Where you put it.

MARTHA. There were two things. Peter would
take his time—
A month—six months—how should I know ?—and
die.

You'd be in France, and I'd go down alive
Into the filth of hell : O I have felt
As if to flay myself where Luther's toucht me
Would make me laugh like a child at being tickled,
If it would take the sickening sense of him off
me !—

That was one thing I saw. And there was this—
Peter might die before you went to France,

The Deserter

And very soon you would be going, you said.
You'd come for me ;—and I need not be the
pleasure

Of a fiendish monkey, if Peter would die soon.

SOLDIER. And so you plied him.

MARTHA. I tell you, you can't blame me.
He'd promised me to Luther. And what great thing
Is a dram more or less to a dying tippler ?

SOLDIER. I am not blaming you ; but I am going.

MARTHA. Going ? Where to ?

SOLDIER. The way I came. I know
What I shall have there ; it's clean black or white,
The offer there : you live or else you're killed.
But here—well, I can say this for the war :
It does get you away from living at home.

MARTHA. I've killed your love for me.

SOLDIER. I can't tell you.
When I'm in clink, and feel a decent man,
I shall know that. Now all I know is this—
I will not let the life that you belong to
Touch me.

MARTHA. So I should soil you !

SOLDIER. It's no good,

The Deserter

MARtha. A man's not dainty if there are things
He cannot eat.

MARTHA. You are not really going?—
O leave love out! For pity's sake—

SOLDIER. I can't!

MARTHA. You will let Luther put his clutch on
me?

SOLDIER. You'll have me weakening; I must go
now.

I should feel safe if I could see the bayonets
Coming to take me: and likely I'll meet them.

(He goes.)

MARTHA. You are not leaving me here?—

*(A pause. MARTHA is seated with chin in
hands, staring at the ground.)*

(The little girl runs in.)

THE GIRL. O mummy! Do you know what
Luther says?

He's going to be my daddy from now on!
Will it come true?

MARTHA. I dare say. Have you been
happy?

The Deserter

THE GIRL. I always am with him.—And he's
to be

Quite a new sort of daddy. And he's sent
A present to you.

MARTHA. To me?

THE GIRL. I was to hold it
Behind my back, and say, "A present for you
From Luther."

MARTHA. Show me.

THE GIRL. A dandelion-clock!—
I don't think *that's* much of a present, do you?

CURTAIN.

The End of the World

PERSONS

HUFF, the Farmer

SOLLERS, the Wainwright

MERRICK, the Smith

VINE, the Publican

SHALE, the Labourer

A DOWSER

MRS. HUFF

WARP, the Molecatcher

Men and Women of the Village

ACT I

SCENE.—*A public-house kitchen. HUFF the Farmer and SOLLERS the Wainwright talking ; another man, a stranger, sitting silent.*

HUFF. Ay, you may think we're well off—

SOLLERS. Now for croaks,
Old toad ! who's trodden on you now ?—Go on ;
But if you can, croak us a new tune.

HUFF. Ay,
You think you're well off—and don't grab my words
Before they're spoken—but some folks, I've heard,
Pity us living quiet in the valley.

SOLLERS. Well, I suppose 'tis their affair.

HUFF. Is it ?
But what I mean to say,—if they think small
Of us that live in the valley, mayn't it show
That we aren't all so happy as we think ?

The End of the World

(MERRICK *the Smith comes in.*)

MERRICK. Quick, cider ! I believe I've swallowed
a coal.

SOLLERS. Good evening. True, the heat's a
wonder to-night. (SMITH *draws himself cider.*)

HUFF. Haven't you brought your flute ? We've
all got room

For music in our minds to-night, I'll swear.
Working all day in the sun do seem to push
The thought out of your brain.

SOLLERS. O, 'tis the sun
Has trodden on you ? That's what makes you croak ?
Ay, whistle him somewhat : put a tune in his brain ;
He'll else croak us out of pleasure with drinking.

MERRICK. 'Tis quenching, I believe.—A tune ?
Too hot.

You want a fiddler.

HUFF. Nay, I want your flute.
I like a piping sound, not scraping o' guts.

MERRICK. This is no weather for a man to play
Flutes or music at all that asks him spend
His breath and spittle : you want both yourself
These oven days. Wait till a fiddler comes.

The End of the World

HUFF. Who ever comes down here ?

SOLLERS. There's someone come.

(Pointing with his pipe to the stranger.)

MERRICK. Good evening, mister. Are you a man
for tunes ?

STRANGER. And if I was I'd give you none
to-night.

MERRICK. Well, no offence : there's no offence,
I hope,

In taking a dummy for a tuneful man.

Is it for can't or won't you are ?

STRANGER. You wouldn't, if you carried in your
mind

What I've been carrying all day.

SOLLERS. What's that ?

STRANGER. You wait ; you'll know about it soon ;
O yes,

Soon enough it will find you out and rouse you.

HUFF. Now ain't that just the way we go down
here ?

Here in the valley we're like dogs in a yard,
Chained to our kennels and wall'd in all round,
And not a sound of the world jumps over our hills.

The End of the World

And when there comes a passenger among us,
One who has heard what's stirring out beyond,
'Tis a grutchy mumchance fellow in the dismals !

STRANGER. News, is it, you want ? I could give
you news !—

I wonder, did you ever hate to feel
The earth so fine and splendid ?

HUFF. Oh, you're one
Has stood in the brunt of the world's wickedness,
Like me ? But listen, and I'll give you a tale
Of wicked things done in this little valley,
Done against me, will surely make you think
The Devil here fetcht up his masterpiece.

SOLLERS. Ah, but it's hot enough without you
talking
Your old hell fire about that pair of sinners.
Leave them alone and drink.

HUFF. I'll smell them grilling
One of these days.

MERRICK. But there'll be nought to drink
When that begins ! Best keep your skin full now.

STRANGER. What do I care for wickedness ? Let
those

The End of the World

Who've played with dirt, and thought the game was
bold,

Make much of it while they can : there's a big thing
Coming down to us, ay, well on its road,
Will make their ploys seem mighty piddling sport.

HUFF. This is a fool ; or else it's what I think,—
The world now breeds such crowd that they've no
room

For well-grown sins : they hatch 'em small as flies.
But you stay here, out of the world awhile,
Here where a man's mind, and a woman's mind,
Can fling out large in wickedness : you'll see
Something monstrous here, something dreadful.

STRANGER. I've seen enough of that. Though it
was only

Fancying made me see it, it was enough :
I've seen the folk of the world yelling aghast,
Scurrying to hide themselves. I want nought else
Monstrous and dreadful.—

MERRICK. What had roused 'em so ?
Some house afire ?

HUFF. A huzzy flogged to death
For her hard-faced adultery ?

The End of the World

STRANGER (*too intent to hear them*). Oh to think
of it !

Talk, do, chatter some nonsense, else I'll think :
And then I'm feeling like a grub that crawls
All abroad in a dusty road ; and high
Above me, and shaking the ground beneath me,
come
Wheels of a thundering wain, right where I'm
plodding.

SOLLERS. Queer thinking, that.

STRANGER. And here's a queerer thing.
I have a sort of lust in me, pushing me still
Into that terrible way of thinking, like
Black men in India lie them down and long
To feel their holy wagon crack their spines.

MERRICK. Do you mean beetles ? I've driven
over scores,
They sprawling on their backs, or standing mazed.
I never knew they liked it.

SOLLERS. He means frogs.
I know what's in his mind. When I was young
My mother would catch us frogs and set them down,
Lapt in a screw of paper, in the ruts,

The End of the World

And carts going by would quash 'em ; and I'd
laugh,

And yet be thinking, " Suppose it was myself
Twisted stiff in huge paper, and wheels
Big as the wall of a barn treading me flat ! "

HUFF. I know what's in his mind : just madness
it is.

He's lookt too hard at his fellows in the world ;
Sight of their monstrous hearts, like devils in
cages,

Has jolted all the gearing of his wits.

It needs a tough brain, ay, a brain like mine,
To pore on ugly sin and not go mad.

STRANGER. Madness ! You're not far out.—I
came up here

To be alone and quiet in my thoughts,
Alone in my own dreadful mind. The path,
Of red sand trodden hard, went up between
High hedges overgrown of hawthorn blowing
White as clouds ; ay, it seemed burrowed through
A white sweet-smelling cloud,—I walking there
Small as a hare that runs its tunnelled drove
Thro' the close heather. And beside my feet

The End of the World

Blue greygles drifted gleaming over the grass ;
And up I climbed to sunlight green in birches,
And the path turned to daisies among grass
With bonfires of the broom beside, like flame
Of burning straw : and I lookt into your valley.
I could scarce look.

Anger was smarting in my eyes like grit.
O the fine earth and fine all for nothing !
Mazed I walkt, seeing and smelling and hearing :
The meadow lands all shining fearfully gold,—
Cruel as fire the sight of them toucht my mind ;
Breathing was all a honey taste of clover
And bean flowers : I would have rather had it
Carrion, or the stink of smouldering brimstone.
And larks aloft, the happy piping fools,
And squealing swifts that slid on hissing wings,
And yellowhammers playing spry in hedges.
I never noted them before ; but now—
Yes, I was mad, and crying mad, to see
The earth so fine, fine all for nothing !

SOLLERS (*spits*). Pst ! yellowhammers ! He talks
gentry talk.
That's worse than being mad.

The End of the World

STRANGER. I tell you, you'll be feeling them
to-morn

And hating them to be so wonderful.

MERRICK. Let's have some sense. Where do you
live ?

STRANGER. Nowhere.

I'm always travelling.

HUFF. Why, what's your trade ?

STRANGER. A dowser.

HUFF. You're the man for me !

STRANGER. Not I.

HUFF. Ho, this is better than a fiddler now !

One of those fellows who have nerves so clever
That they can feel the waters of underground
Tingling in their fingers ?

You find me a spring in my high grazing-field,
I'll give you what I save in trundling water.

STRANGER. I find you water now !—No, but I'll
find you

Fire and fear and unbelievable death.

(VINE the Publican comes in.)

VINE. Are ye all served ? Ay, seems so ; what's
your score ?

The End of the World

- MERRICK. Two ciders.
- HUFF. Three.
- SOLLERS. And two for me.
- VINE (*to DOWSER*). And you ?
- DOWSER. Naught. I was waiting on you.
- VINE. Will you drink ?
- DOWSER. Ay ! Drink ! what else is left for a
man to do
Who knows what I know ?
- VINE. Good. What is't you know ?
You tell it out and set my trade a-buzzing.
- SOLLERS. He's queer. Give him his mug and
ease his tongue.
- VINE. I had to swill the pigs : else I'd been
here ;
But we've the old fashion in this house ; you draw,
I keep the score. Well, what's the worry on you ?
- SOLLERS. Oh he's in love.
- DOWSER. You fleering grinning louts,
I'll give it you now ; now have it in your faces !
- SOLLERS. Crimini, he's going to fight !
- DOWSER. You try and fight with the thing that's
on my side !

The End of the World

MERRICK. A ranter !

HUFF. A boozy one then.

DOWSER. Open yon door ;

'Tis dark enough by now. Open it, you.

VINE. Hold on. Have you got something fierce
outside ?

MERRICK. A Russian bear ?

SOLLERS. Dowsers can play strange games.

HUFF. No tricks !

DOWSER. This is a trick to rouse the world.
(He opens the door.)

Look out ! Between the elms ! There's my fierce
thing.

MERRICK. He means the star with the tail like a
feather of fire.

SOLLERS. Comet, it's called.

HUFF. Do you mean the comet, mister ?

DOWSER. What do you think of it ?

HUFF Pretty enough.

But I saw a man loose off a rocket once ;

It made more stir and flare of itself ; though yon

Does better at steady burning.

DOWSER. Stir and flare !

The End of the World

Hangs like a fiery buzzard in the night
Intent over our earth—Ay, now his journey
Points, straight as a plummet's drop, down to us !

HUFF. Why, that's the end of the world !

DOWSER. You've said it now.

SOLLERS. What, soon ? In a day or two ?

MERRICK. You can't mean that !

VINE. End of the World ! Well now, I never
thought

To hear the news of that. If you've the truth
In what you say, likely this is an evening
That we'll be talking over often and often.

“ How was it, Sollers ? ” I'll say ; “ or you, Merrick,
Do you mind clearly how he lookt ? ”—And
then—

“ ‘ End of the world, ’ he said, and drank—like that,
Solemn ! ”—And right he was : he had it all
As sure as I have when my sow's to farrow.

DOWSER. Are you making a joke of me ? Keep
your mind
For tippling while you can.

VINE. Was that a joke ?
I'm always bad at seeing 'em, even my own.

The End of the World

DOWSER. A fool's ! 'Twill cheer you when the
earth blows up
Like as it were all gunpowder.

VINE. You mean
The star will butt his burning head against us ?
'Twill knock the world to flinders, I suppose ?

DOWSER. Ay, or with that wild, monstrous tail of
his
Smash down upon the air, and make it bounce
Like water under the flukes of a harpooned whale,
And thrash it to a poisonous fire ; and we
And all the life of the world drowned in blazing !

VINE. 'Twill be a handsome sight. If my old
wife
Were with me now ! This would have suited her.
“ I do like things to happen ! ” she would say ;
Never shindy enough for her ; and now
She's gone, and can't be seeing this !

DOWSER. You poor fool.
How will it be a sight to you, when your eyes
Are scorcht to little cinders in your head ?

VINE. Whether or no, there must be folks
outside

The End of the World

Willing to know of this. I'll scatter your news.

(He goes.)

(A short pause : then SOLLERS breaks out.)

SOLLERS. No, no ; it wouldn't do for me at all ;
Nor for you neither, Merrick ? End of the World ?
Bogy ! A parson's tale or a bairn's !

MERRICK.

That's it.

Your trade's a gift, easy as playing tunes.
But Sollers here and I, we've had to drill
Sinew and muscle into their hard lesson,
Until they work in timber and glowing iron
As kindly as I pick up my pint : your work
Grows in your nature, like plain speech in a child,
But we have learnt to think in a foreign tongue ;
And something must come out of all our skill !
We shan't go sliding down as glib as you
Into notions of the End of the World.

SOLLERS. Give me a tree, you may say, and give
me steel,

And I'll put forth my shapely mind ; I'll make,
Out of my head like telling a well-known tale,
A wain that goes as comely on the roads
As a ship sailing, the lines of it true as gospel.

The End of the World

Have I learnt that all for nothing ?—O no !
End of the World ? It wouldn't do at all.
No more making of wains, after I've spent
My time in getting the right skill in my hands ?

DOWSER. Ay, you begin to feel it now, I think ;
But you complain like boys for a game spoilt :
Shaping your carts, forging your iron ! But Life,
Life, the mother who lets her children play
So seriously busy, trade and craft,—
Life with her skill of a million years' perfection
To make her heart's delighted glorying
Of sunlight, and of clouds about the moon,
Spring lighting her daffodils, and corn
Ripening gold to ruddy, and giant seas,
And mountains sitting in their purple clothes—
O life I am thinking of, life the wonder,
All blotcht out by a brutal thrust of fire
Like a midge that a clumsy thumb squashes and
smears.

HUFF. Let me but see the show beginning,
though !
You'd mind me then ! O I would like you all
To watch how I should figure, when the star

The End of the World

Brandishes over the whole air its flame
Of thundering fire ; and naught but yellow rubbish
Parcht on the perishing ground, and there are tongues
Chapt with thirst, glad to lap stinking ponds,
And pale glaring faces spying about
On the earth withering, terror the only speech !
Look for me then, and see me stand alone
Easy and pleasant in the midst of it all.
Did you not make your merry scoff of me ?
Was it your talk, that when yon shameless pair
Threw their wantoning in my face like dirt,
I had no heart against them but to grumble ?
You would be saying that, I know ! But now,
Now I believe it's time for you to see
My patient heart at last taking its wages.

SOLLERS. Pull up, man ! Screw the brake on
your running tongue,
Else it will rattle you down the tumbling way
This fellow's gone.

MERRICK. And one man's enough
With brain quagged axle-deep in crazy mire.
We won't have you beside him in his puddles,
And calling out with him on the End of the World

The End of the World

To heave you out with a vengeance.

HUFF.

What you want !

Have I not borne enough to make me know
I must be righted sometime ?—And what else
Would break the hardy sin in them, which lets
Their souls parade so daring and so tall
Under God's hate and mine ? What else could pay
For all my wrong but a blow of blazing anger
Striking down to shiver the earth, and change
Their strutting wickedness to horror and crying ?

MERRICK. Be quiet, Huff ! If you mean to
believe

This dowser's stuff, and join him in his bedlam,
By God, you'll have to reckon with my fist.

(SHALE comes in. HUFF glares at him speechless, but with wrath evidently working.)

SHALE. Where's the joker ? You, is it ? Here's
hot news

You've brought us ; all the valley's hissing aloud,
And makes as much of you falling into it
As a pail of water would of a glowing coal.

SOLLERS. Don't you start burbling too, Shale.

SHALE.

That's the word !

The End of the World

This is the man I told you of when you
Were talking small of sin. You made it out,
Did you, a fool's mere nasty game, like dogs
That snuggle in muck, and grin and roll themselves
With snorting pleasure? Ah, but you are wrong.
'Tis something that goes thrusting dreadfully
Its wilful bravery of evil against
The worth and right of goodness in the world :
Ay, do you see how his face still brags at me ?
And long it has been, the time he's had to walk
Lording about me with his wickedness.
Do you know what he dared ? I had a wife,
A flighty pretty linnet-headed girl,
But mine : he practised on her with his eyes ;
He knew of luring glances, and she went
After his calling lust : and all since then
They've lived together, fleering in my face,
Pleased in sight of the windows of my house
With doing wrong, and making my disgrace.
O but wait here with me ; wait till your news
Is not to be mistaken, for the way
The earth buckles and sings like hot boards :
You'll surely see how dreadful sin can be

The End of the World

Then, when you mark these two running about,
With raging fear for what they did against me
Buzzing close to their souls, stinging their hearts,
And they like scampering beasts when clegs are
fierce,

Or flinging themselves low as the ground to writhe,
Their arms hugging their desperate heads. And then
You'll see what 'tis to be an upright man,
Who keeps a patient anger for his wrongs
Thinking of judgment coming—you will see that
When you mark how my looks hunt these wretches,
And smile upon their groans and posturing anguish.
O watch how calm I'll be, when the blazing air
Judges their wickedness ; you watch me then
Looking delighted, like a nobleman
Who sees his horse winning an easy race.

MERRICK. You fool, Huff, you believe it now !

HUFF.

You fool,

Merrick, how should I not believe a thing
That calls aloud on my mind and spirit, and they
Answer to it like starving conquering soldiers
Told to break out and loot ?

SHALE.

You vile old wasp !

The End of the World

SOLLERS. We've talked enough : let's all go home
and sleep ;

There might be a fiend in the air about us, one
Who pours his will into our minds to see
How we can frighten one another.

HUFF.

A fiend ?

Shale will soon have the flapping wings of a fiend,
And flaming wings, beating about his head.

There'll be no air for Shale, very soon now,
But the breathing of a fiend : the star's coming !

The star that breathes a horrible fury of fire

Like glaring fog into the empty night ;

And in the gust of its wrath the world will soon

Shrivel and spin like paper in a furnace.

I knew they both would have to pay me at last

With sight of their damned souls for all my
wrong !

SHALE. Somebody stop his gab.

MERRICK (*seizing the DOWSER and shaking him*). Is
it the truth ?

Is it the truth we're in the way of the star ?

SOLLERS. O let us go home ; let us go home and
sleep !

The End of the World

(A crowd of men and women burst in and shout confusedly.)

1. Look out for the star !
 2. 'Tis moving, moving.
 3. Grows as you stare at it.
 4. Bigger than ever.
1. Down it comes with a diving pounce,
As though it had lookt for us and at last found us.
2. O so near and coming so quick !
 3. And how the burning hairs of its tail
Do seem surely to quiver for speed.
 4. We saw its great tail twitch behind it,
'Tis come so near, so gleaming near.
1. The tail is wagging !
 2. Come out and see !
 3. The star is wagging its tail and eyeing us—
 4. Like a cat huncht to leap on a bird.
- MERRICK. Out of my way and let me see for myself.

(They all begin to hustle out : HUFF speaks in midst of the turmoil.)

HUFF. Ay, now begins the just man's reward ;
And hatred of the evil thing

The End of the World

Now is to be satisfied.

Wrong ventured out against me and braved :
And I'll be glad to see all breathing pleasure
Burn as foolishly to naught
As a moth in candle flame,
If I but have my will to watch over those
Who injured me bawling hoarse heartless fear.

*(They are all gone but HUFF, SHALE and the
DOWSER.)*

SHALE. As for you, let you and the women make
Your howling scare of this ; I'll stand and laugh.
But if it truly were the End of the World,
I'd be the man to face it out, not you :
I who have let life go delighted through me,
Not you, who've sulkt away your chance of life
In mumping about being paid for goodness.

(Going.)

HUFF *(after him)*. You wait, you wait !

(He follows the rest.)

DOWSER *(alone)*. Naught but a plague of flies !
I cannot do with noises, and light fools
Terrified round me ; I must go out and think
Where there is quiet and no one near. O, think !

The End of the World

Life that has done such wonders with its thinking,
And never daunted in imagining ;
That has put on the sun and the shining night,
The flowering of the earth and tides of the sea, —
And irresistible rage of fate itself,
All these as garments for its spirit's journey—
O now this life, in the brute chance of things,
Murder'd, uselessly murder'd ! And naught else
For ever but senseless rounds of hurrying motion
That cannot glory in itself. O no !
I will not think of that ; I'll blind my brain
With fancying the splendours of destruction ;
When like a burr in the star's fiery mane
The crackling earth is caught and rusht along,
The forests on the mountains blazing so,
That from the rocks of ore beneath them come
White-hot rivers of smelted metal pouring
Across the plains to roar into the sea. . . .

(The curtain is lowered for a few moments only.)

The End of the World

ACT II

As before, a little while after. The room is empty when the curtain goes up. SOLLERS runs in and paces about, but stops short when he catches sight of a pot dog on the mantelpiece.

SOLLERS. The pace it is coming down!—What to do now?—

My brain has stopt : it's like a clock that's fallen
Out of a window and broke all its cogs.—

Where's that old cider, Vine would have us pay
Twopence a glass for? Let's try how it smells :
Old Foxwhelp, and a humming stingo it is !

(To the pot dog.)

Hullo, you ! What are you grinning at?—
I know !

There'll be no score against me for this drink !
O that score ! I've drunk it down for a week
With every gulp of cider, and every gulp
Was half the beauty it should have been, the score
So scratcht my swallowing throat, like a wasp in the
drink !

The End of the World

And I need never have heeded it!—

Old grinning dog! You've seen me happy here;
And now, all's done! But do you know this too,

That I can break you now, and never called

To pay for you? (*Throwing the dog on the floor.*)

I shall be savage soon!

We're leaving all this!—O, and it was so pleasant
Here, in here, of an evening.—Smash!

(*He sweeps a lot of crockery on to the floor.*)

It's all no good! Let's make a wreck of it all!

(*Picking up a chair and swinging it.*)

Damn me! Now I'm forgetting to drink, and
soon

'Twill be too late. Where's there a mug not
shivered?

(*He goes to draw himself cider. MERRICK
rushes in.*)

MERRICK. You at the barrels too? Out of the
road!

(*He pushes SOLLERS away and spills his mug.*)

SOLLERS. Go and kick out of doors, you black
donkey.

The End of the World

MERRICK. Let me come at the vessel, will you ?
(They wrestle savagely.)

SOLLERS. Keep off ;
I'm the first here. Lap what you've spilt of mine.

MERRICK. You with your chiselling and screw-
driving,
Your wooden work, you bidding me, the man
Who hammers a meaning into red-hot iron ?

*(VINE comes in slowly. He is weeping ; the
two wrestlers stop and stare at him, as he sits
down, and holds his head in his hands,
sobbing.)*

VINE. O this is a cruel affair !

SOLLERS. Here's Vine crying !

VINE. I've seen the moon.

MERRICK. The moon ? 'Tisn't the moon
That's tumbling on us, but yon raging star.
What notion now is clotted in your head ?

VINE. I've seen the moon ; it has nigh broke my
heart.

SOLLERS. Not the moon too jumping out of her
ways ?

VINE. No, no ;—but going quietly and shining,

The End of the World

The faint grey cloud that set the gleaming wheel
Around the tilted slip of shining silver.
O it did seem to me so safe and homely,
The moon quietly going about the earth ;
It's a rare place we have to live in, here ;
And life is such a comfortable thing——
And what's the sense of it all ? Naught but to make
Cruel as may be the slaughtering of it.

(He breaks down again.)

SOLLERS. It beats my mind !

(He begins to walk up and down desperately.)

MERRICK. 'Twas bound to come sometime,
Bound to come, I suppose. 'Tis a poor thing
For us, to fall plumb in the chance of it ;
But, now or another time, 'twas bound to be.—
I have been thinking back. When I was a lad
I was delighted with my life : there seemed
Naught but things to enjoy. Say we were bathing :
There'd be the cool smell of the water, and cool
The splashing under the trees : but I did loathe
The sinking mud slithering round my feet,
And I did love to loathe it so ! And then
We'd troop to kill a wasp's nest ; and for sure

The End of the World

I would be stung ; and if I liked the dusk
And singing and the game of it all, I loved
The smart of the stings, and fleeing the buzzing
furies.

And sometimes I'd be looking at myself
Making so much of everything ; there'd seem
A part of me speaking about myself :

“ You know, this is much more than being happy.
'Tis hunger of some power in you, that lives
On your heart's welcome for all sorts of luck,
But always looks beyond you for its meaning.”
And that's the way the world's kept going on,
I believe now. Misery and delight
Have both had liking welcome from it, both
Have made the world keen to be glad and sorry.
For why ? It felt the living power thrive
The more it made everything, good and bad,
Its own belonging, forged to its own affair,—
The living power that would do wonders some day.
I don't know if you take me ?

SOLLERS.

I do, fine ;

I've felt the very thought go through my mind
When I was at my wains ; though 'twas a thing

The End of the World

Of such a flight I could not read its colour.—
Why was I like a man sworn to a thing,
Working to have my wains in every curve,
Ay, every tenon, right as they should be ?
Not for myself, not even for those wains :
But to keep in me living at its best
The skill that must go forward and shape the world,
Helping it on towards its masterpiece.

MERRICK. And never was there aught to come
of it !

The world was always looking to use its life
In some great handsome way at last. And now—
We are just fooled. There never was any good
In the world going on or being at all.
The fine things life has plotted to do are worth
A rotten toadstool kickt to flying bits.
End of the World ? Ay, and the end of a joke.

VINE. Well, Huff's the man for this turn.

MERRICK. Ay, the good man !
He could but grunt when times were pleasant ; now
There's misery enough to make him trumpet.
And yet, by God, he shan't come blowing his horn
Over my misery !

The End of the World

We are just fooled, did I say?—We fooled ourselves,
Looking for worth in what was still to come ;
And now there's a stop to our innings. Well, that's
fair :

I've been a living man, and might have been
Nothing at all ! I've had the world about me,
And felt it as my own concern. What else
Should I be crying for ? I've had my turn.
The world may be for the sake of naught at last,
But it has been for my sake : I've had that.

(He sits again, and broods.)

SOLLERS. I can't stay here. I must be where my
sight

May silence with its business all my thinking—
Though it will be the star plunged down so close
It puffs its flaming vengeance in my face.

(He goes.)

VINE. I wish there were someone who had done
me wrong,
Like Huff with his wife and Shale ; I wish there
were
Somebody I would like to see go crazed
With staring fright. I'd have my pleasure then

The End of the World

Of living on into the End of the World.

But there is no one at all for me, no one

Now my poor wife is gone.

MERRICK.

Why, what did she

To harm you ?

VINE. Didn't she marry me ?—It's true

She made it come all right. She died at last.

Besides, it would be wasting wishes on her,

To be in hopes of her weeping at this.

She'd have her hands on her hips and her tongue
jumping

As nimble as a stoat, delighting round

The way the world's to be terrible and tormented.—

Ay, but I'll have a thing to tell her now

When she begins to ask the news ! I'll say

“ You've misst such a show as never was nor will be,

A roaring great affair of death and ruin ;

And I was there—the world smasht to sparkles ! ”

O, I can see her vext at that !

(MERRICK has been sunk in thought during this, but VINE seems to brighten at his notion, and speaks quite cheerfully to HUFF, who now comes in, looking mopish, and sits down.)

The End of the World

VINE. We've all been envying you, Huff. You're well off,

You with your goodness and your enemies
Showing you how to relish it with their terror.
When do you mean the gibing is to start ?

HUFF. There's time enough.

VINE. O, do they still hold out ?
If they should be for spiting you to the last !
You'd best keep on at them : think out a list
Of frantic things for them to do, when air
Is scorching smother and the sin they did
Frightens their hearts. You'll shout them into fear,
I undertake, if you find breath enough.

HUFF. You have the breath. What's all your pester for ?

You leave me be.

VINE. Why, you're to do for me
What I can't do myself.—And yet it's hard
To make out where Shale hurt you. What's the sum
Of all he did to you ? Got you quit of marriage
Without the upset of a funeral.

HUFF. Why need you blurt your rambling mind
at me ?

The End of the World

Let me bide quiet in my thought awhile,
And it's a little while we have for thought.

MERRICK. I know your thought. Paddling round
and around,

Like a squirrel working in a spinning cage
With his neck stretcht to have his chin poke up,
And silly feet busy and always going ;
Paddling round the story of your good life,
Your small good life, and how the decent men
Have jeered at your wry antic.

HUFF.

My good life !

And what good has my goodness been to me ?
You show me that ! Somebody show me that !
A caterpillar munching a cabbage-heart,
Always drudging further and further from
The sounds and lights of the world, never abroad
Nor flying free in warmth and air sweet-smelling :
A crawling caterpillar, eating his life
In a deaf dark—that's my gain of goodness !
And it's too late to hatch out now !—
I can but fancy what I might have been ;
I scarce know how to sin !—But I believe
A long while back I did come near to it.

The End of the World

MERRICK. Well done!—O but I should have guesst all this!

HUFF. I was in Droitwich; and the sight of the place

Is where they cook the brine: a long dark shed,
Hot as an oven, full of a grey steam
And ruddy light that leaks out of the furnace;
And stirring the troughs, ladling the brine that boils
As thick as treacle, a double standing row,
Women—boldly talking in wicked jokes
All day long. I went to see 'em. It was
A wonderful rousing sight. Not one of them
Was really wearing clothes: half of a sack
Pinned in an apron was enough for most,
And here and there might be a petticoat;
But nothing in the way of bodices.—
O, they knew words to shame a carter's face!

MERRICK. This is the thought you would be quiet in!

HUFF. Where else can I be quiet? Now there's an end

Of daring, 'tis the one place my life has made
Where I may try to dare in thought. I mind,

The End of the World

When I stood in the midst of those bare women,
All at once, outburst with a rising buzz,
A mob of flying thoughts was wild in me :
Things I might do swarmed in my brain pell-mell,
Like a heap of flies kickt into humming cloud.
I beat them down ; and now I cannot tell
For certain what they were. I can call up
Naught venturesome and darting like their style ;
Very tame braveries now !—O Shale's the man
To smile upon the End of the World ; 'tis Shale
Has lived the bold stiff fashion, and filled himself
With thinking pride in what a man may do.—
I wish I had seen those women more than once !

VINE. Well, here's an upside down ! This is old
Huff !

What have you been in your heart all these years ?
The man you were or the new man you are ?

HUFF. Just a dead flesh !

MERRICK. Nay, Huff the good man at least
Was something alive, though snarling like trapt
vermin.

But this ? What's this for the figure of a man ?
'Tis a boy's smutty picture on a wall.

The End of the World

HUFF. I was alive, was I? Like a blind bird
That flies and cannot see the flight it takes,
Feeling it with mere rowing of its wings.
But Shale—he's had a stirring sense of what he is.

*(Shouting outside. Then SOLLERS walks in
again, very quiet and steady. He stands in
the middle, looking down on the floor.)*

VINE. What do they holla for there?

SOLLERS. The earth.

MERRICK. The earth?

SOLLERS. The earth's afire.

HUFF. The earth blazing already?

(Shouts again.)

O, not so soon as this?

VINE. What sort of a fire?

SOLLERS. The earth has caught the heat of the
star, you fool.

MERRICK. I know: there's come some dazzle in
your eyes

From facing to the star; a lamp would do it.

HUFF. It will be that. Your sight, being so
strained,

Is flashing of itself.

The End of the World

If I could look back to one manful hour
Of romping in the face of all my goodness!—

(SHALE *comes in, dragging* MRS. HUFF *by the hand.*)

SHALE. Huff! Where's Huff?—Huff, you must
take her back!

You'll take her back? She's yours: I give her up.

MERRICK. Belike here's something bold again.

MRS. HUFF (*to* SHALE). Once more,

Listen.

SHALE. I will not listen. There's no time
For aught but giving you back where you belong;
And that's with you, Huff. Take her.

HUFF. Here is depth

I cannot see to. Is it your last fling?—

The dolt I am in these things!—What's this way
You've found of living wickedly to the end?

SHALE. Scorn as you please, but take her back,
man, take her.

HUFF. But she's my wife! Take her back now?
What for?

MRS. HUFF. What for? Have you not known of
thieves that throw

The End of the World

Their robbery down, soon as they hear a step
Sounding behind them on the road, and run
A long way off, and pull an honest face ?
Ay, see Shale's eyes practising baby-looks !
He never stole, not he !

SHALE. Don't hear her talk.

MRS. HUFF. But he was a talker once ! Love was
the thing ;
And love, he swore, would make the wrong go right,
And Huff was a kind of devil—and that's true——

HUFF. What ? I've been devilish and never
knew ?

MRS. HUFF. The devil in the world that hates all
love.
But Shale said, he'd the love in him would hold
If the world's frame and the fate of men were
crackt.

SHALE. What I said !
Whoever thought the world was going to crack ?

MRS. HUFF. And now he hears someone move
behind him.—
They'll say, perhaps, " You stole this ! "—Down it
goes,

The End of the World

Thrown to the dirty road—thrown to Huff !

SHALE. Yes, to the owner.

MRS. HUFF. It was not such brave thieving.
You did not take me from my owner, Shale :
There's an old robber will do that some day,
Not you.

VINE. Were you thinking of me then, missis ?

MRS. HUFF (*still to SHALE*). You found me lost in
the dirt : I was with Huff.

You lifted me from there ; and there again,
Like a frightened urchin, you're for throwing me.

SHALE. Let it be that ! I'm firm
Not to have you about me, when the thing,
Whatever it is, that's standing now behind
The burning of the world, comes out on us.

HUFF. The way men cheat ! This windle-stalk
was he
Would hold a show of spirit for the world
To study while it ruined !—Make what you please
Of your short wrangle here, but leave me out.
I have my thoughts—O far enough from this.

(*Turning away.*)

The End of the World

SHALE (*seizing him.*) You shall not put me off. I tell you, Huff,
You are to take her back now.

HUFF. Take her back !
And what has she to do with what I want ?

SHALE. Isn't she yours ? I must be quit of her ;
I'll not be in the risk of keeping her.
She's yours !

HUFF. And what's the good of her now to me ?
What's the good of a woman whom I've married ?

(*During this, WARP the Molecatcher has come in.*)

WARP. Shale and Huff at their old pother again !

MERRICK. The Molecatcher !

SOLLERS. Warp, have you travelled far ?
Is it through frenzy and ghastly crowds you've
come ?

VINE. Have you got dreadful things to tell us,
Warp ?

WARP. Why, no.
But seemingly you'd have had news for me,
If I'd come later. Is Huff to murder Shale,
Or Shale for murdering Huff ? One way or t'other,

The End of the World

'Tis time 'twas settled surely.—Mrs. Huff,
They're neither of them worth you : here's your
health.

(Draws and drinks.)

HUFF. Where have you been ? Are you not new
from folk

That throng together in a pelting horror ?

WARP. Do you think the whole land hearkens to
the flurry

Of an old dog biting at a young dog's throat ?

MERRICK. No, no ! Not their shrill yapping ;
you've not heard

The world's near to be blasted ?

WARP. No mutter of it.

I am from walking the whole ground I trap,

And there's no likeness of it, but the moles

I've turned up dead and dried out of three
counties.

SOLLERS. Why, but the fire that's eating the
whole earth ;

The breath of it is scarlet in the sky !

You must have seen that ?

WARP. But what's taken you ?

The End of the World

You are like boys that go to hunt for ghosts,
And turn the scuttle of rats to a roused demon
Crawling to shut the door of the barn they search.
Fire? Yes, fire is playing a pretty game
Yonder, and has its golden fun to itself,
Seemingly.

SOLLERS. You don't know what 'tis that burns?

WARP. Call me a mole and not a molecatcher
If I do not. It is a rick that burns;
And a strange thing I'll count it if the rick
Be not old Huff's.

SOLLERS. That flare a fired stack?

HUFF. Only one of my ricks alight? O Glory!
There may be chance for me yet.

MERRICK. Best take the train
To Droitwich, Huff.

VINE (*at the door*). It would be like a stack,
But for the star.

SOLLERS (*to WARP*). Yes, as you're so clever,
You can talk down maybe yon brandishing star!

WARP. O, 'tis the star has flickt your brains?
Indeed,

The End of the World

The tail swings long enough to-night for that.
Well, look your best at it ; 'tis off again
To go its rounds, they tell me, from now on ;
And the next time it swaggers in our sky,
The moles a long while will have tired themselves
Of having their easy joke with me.

(A pause.)

MERRICK.

You mean

The flight of the star is from us ?

SOLLERS.

But the world,

The whole world reckons on it battering us !

WARP. Who told you that ?

SOLLERS.

A dowser.

MERRICK.

Where's he gone ?

WARP. A dowser ! say a tramping conjurer.

You'll believe aught, if you believe a dowser.

SOLLERS. I had it in me to be doubting him.

MERRICK. The noise you made was like that !

But I knew

You'd laugh at me, so sure you were the world

Would shiver like a bursting grindstone :

Else I'd have said out loud, 'twas a fool's whimsy.

The End of the World

VINE. Where are you now ? What am I now to think ?

Your minds run round in puzzles, like chased hares.

I cannot sight them.

MERRICK. Think of going to bed.

SOLLERS. And dreaming prices for your pigs.

MERRICK. O Warp,

You should have seen Vine crying ! The moon, he said,

The silver moon ! Just like an onion 'twas
To stir the water in his eyes.

SOLLERS. He's left

A puddle of his tears where he was droopt
Over the table.

VINE. There's to be no ruin ?—

But what's the word of a molecatcher, to crow
So ringing over a dowser's word ?

WARP. I'll tell you.

These dowsers live on lies : my trade's the truth.

I can read moles, and the way they've dug their
journeys,

The End of the World

Where you'd not see a wrinkle.

VINE.

And he knows

The buried water.

WARP.

There's always buried water,

If you prod deep enough. A dowser finds

Because the whole earth's floating, like a raft.

What does he know? A twitching in his thews;

A dog asleep knows that much. What I know

I've learnt, and if I'd learnt it wrong, I'd starve.

And if I'm right about the grubbing moles,

Won't I be right for news of walking men?

MERRICK. Of course you're right. Let's put the
whole thing by,

And have a pleasant drink.

SHALE (*to* MRS. HUFF). You must be tired

With all this story. Shall we be off for home?

HUFF. You brass! You don't go now with her!

She's mine:

You gave her up.

SHALE.

And you made nothing of her.

(*To* MRS. HUFF.) Come on.

MRS. HUFF. Warp, will you do a thing for me?

The End of the World

WARP. A hundred things.

MRS. HUFF. Then slap me these cur-dogs.

WARP. I will. Where will I slap them, and which first ?

MRS. HUFF. Maybe 'twill do if you but laugh at them.

WARP. I'll try for that ; but they are not good jokes ;

Though there's a kind of monkey-look about them.

MRS. HUFF. They thinking I'd be near one or the other

After this night ! Will I be made no more
Than clay that children puddle to their minds,
Moulding it what they fancy ?—Shale was brave :
He made a boggy and defied it, till
He frightened of his work and ran away.
But Huff !—Huff was for modelling wickedly.

HUFF. Who told you that ?

MRS. HUFF. I need no one's telling.
I was your wife once. Don't I know your goodness ?
A stupid heart gone sour with jealousy,
To feel its blood too dull and thick for sinning.—
Yes, Huff would figure a wicked thought, but had

The End of the World

No notion how, and flung the clay aside.—
O they were gaudy colours both ! But now
Fear has bleacht their swagger and left them
blank,

Fear of a loon that cried, End of the World !

HUFF. Shale, do you know what we're to do ?

SHALE. I'd like

To have the handling of that dowser-man.

HUFF. Just that, my lad, just that !

WARP. And your fired rick ?

HUFF. Let it be blazes ! Quick, Shale, after him !
I'll tramp the night out, but I'll take the rogue.

SHALE (*to the others*). You wait, and see us haul
him by the ears,

And swim the blatherer in Huff's farmyard pond.

(*As HUFF and SHALE go out, they see the comet
before them.*)

HUFF. The devil's own star is that !

SHALE. And floats as calm

As a pike basking.

HUFF. There shouldn't be such stars !

SHALE. Neither such dowsers, and we'll learn
him that. (*They go off together.*)

The End of the World

SOLLERS. Why, the star's dwindling now, surely !

MERRICK. O, small

And dull now to the glowing size it was.

VINE. But is it certain there'll be nothing
smasht ?

Not even a house knockt roaring down in crumbles ?

—And I did think, I'd open my wife's mouth

With envy of the dreadful things I'd seen !

CURTAIN.

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